

2022

# Spice



A maxTax  
Food Line

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Suzapallito

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# Búnga

**CHICKEN  
VERMICELLI  
NOODLE  
SOUP**

(serves 2)



2 pieces of  
chicken breast  
with skin



an onion,  
cut in large  
wedges



4 shallots,  
cut in  
halves



cilantro stems,  
only put in  
at the last 5  
minutes



fish sauce,  
add until  
the original  
goods your  
ancestors  
tell you to  
stop



thinly  
sliced  
chicken



broth,  
impurities  
skimmed



chopped  
green onion



simmering  
talisman, until  
the chicken is  
cooked

thinly sliced  
onion

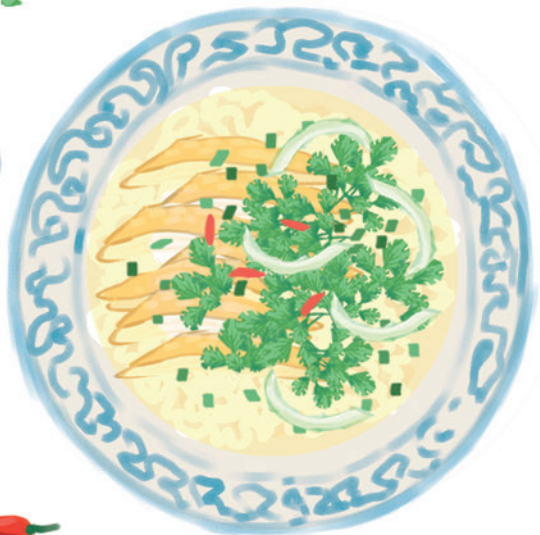


cilantro  
leaves

vermicelli  
noodle, cooked  
as instructed on  
the package, or  
made by hand,  
protagonist style




lime and  
pepper





# Bún gà

Chicken vermicelli noodle soup for two  by Sharpieshepie

## Ingredients:

One large onion, peeled,  
cut into large wedges.  
1/2 cup of thinly sliced onion  
4 shallots, peeled, cut  
in halves

Cilantro bunch, stem and  
leaves separated. Leaves  
chopped, but not too finely  
approximately 3/4 cup

5 stalks of green onion  
2 pieces of chicken breast,  
with or without skin  
100g of dried rice vermicelli,  
cooked as instructed on  
the package

Fish sauce  
Lime  
red pepper

## Eating utensils:

large soup bowl  
chopsticks  
spoon.

## Steps:

This is my comfort food recipe I have graciously lent out to the System. Actual Bún Gà, Hà Nội style, is a bit more complicated to make with more ingredients. But worry not, this recipe is still excellent and very easy to make!

## Prepare the broth

1. Put the chicken breast, onion wedges, and shallots in a pot. Pour in two bowls of water, using your soup bowl - the one on which you will serve this dish - as measurement.
2. In medium heat, simmer until the chicken is cooked. I never measured how much time this takes, but 20-30 minutes seems accurate. Check your chicken regularly to make sure it is not overcooked or undercooked.
3. Regularly skim fat and impurities off the broth.
4. Add fish sauce to taste. I never measure how much fish sauce I add, but the trick is to make the broth slightly saltier than you would have liked. Eaten with bland vermicelli will balance the saltiness out.
5. Remove chicken, leave to rest and cool for 10 minutes.
6. Meanwhile, keep the broth simmering in low heat until it is served. 5 minutes before serving, add cilantro stems to the pot.

## While waiting for the broth to simmer, cook vermicelli

1. Cook the dried vermicelli as per instructed on the package. There are many different brands of vermicelli out there, but I prefer the thicker ones. This is entirely up to your taste.
2. Put cooked vermicelli in two large soup bowls.

## Bring together, serve

1. Thinly slice the chicken breast. Layer this on top of the vermicelli.
2. Top with chopped cilantro leaves, green onions, and onion slices.
3. Pour in the broth.
4. Add lime juice and red pepper to taste. My taste is 1 Tbs of lime juice and a whole lot of peppers.

Enjoy your Bún Gà!









# Sweets to the Sweet

by stiltonbasket

Art by suzapallito

**Though** Luo Binghe has known his Shizun for over fourteen years—his Shizun, and not the Shizun that accepted him into Cang Qiong half a lifetime ago—he does not yet know all of him, or even *most* of him, for new facets of his Shizun's heart reveal himself every day.

It took Luo Binghe ten months to learn that his husband liked to take lemon in his tea, a year before Shizun let slip that he once had a little sister, and nearly half a decade before he accompanied Luo Binghe on a trip to Mobei-jun's northern palace and remarked, quite offhandedly, that there was no season more beautiful than winter.

"Autumn is fairer," Luo Binghe replied, and waited with bated breath for his Shizun's cheeks to flush crimson like elm leaves ripe for falling.

Every day of their marriage has priceless, delivering new pieces of Shizun's own self in the ways he dresses and inks his brushes, in the way he combs his hair—but something like *this* should have shown itself as soon as they were married, and Luo Binghe is still astounded that it didn't.

Because his Shizun (who seems as if he was born to play the role of a wealthy young master, though he assured Binghe that the lives of rich young masters were very different in the world he came from) apparently likes to *cook*.

By now, Luo Binghe has heard all about the world his Shizun came from, and how different it was from this one. Even simple tasks like cooking were simpler there, which is why Shizun prefers to leave their meals up to Luo Binghe; but when he craves foods from his hometown, and begins speaking of condiments and dishes that Luo Binghe has never heard of, Shizun leaves the underground palace to hunt for ingredients with Shang Qinghua before coming back to prepare them in their kitchen on Qing Jing peak.

First, Shizun made a batch of soft flaky pastries with wheat flour instead of rice. He and Shang-shishu almost cried over them, insisting that they tasted just like the almond cakes sold at a bakery they used to visit when they were boys. Two weeks later, they went off again and returned carrying boxes of spiny golden fruits, which they baked into dense, crumbling cakes no bigger than two of Luo Binghe's fingers; and then they fried balls of sweet dough so light that a breath could blow them away, and filled them with strawberries and milk cream whipped nearly solid with a spoon.

"Shizun is a better cook than I am," Luo Binghe laughed, when Shen Qingqiu woke him early one morning and brought him a plate of the sweet dough pastries with tea. "Come and eat with me, beloved."

That was nearly a month ago, and today, Luo Binghe opened his eyes shortly after dawn to find his husband missing from their bed again. He usually prefers to wake before Shizun does, or at least rouse himself to the scent of Shizun's hair and skin, immeasurably precious after his too-frequent dreams of the five years he and his husband were parted by Shizun's death: and though he would rather die than overstep his bounds in a way Shizun could not tolerate, Luo Binghe has never learned how to bear the pain of waking without Shen Qingqiu beside him.

"A-Yuan?" he mumbles, patting Shen Qingqiu's abandoned pillow. "Where are you?"

"In the kitchen," Shizun calls back. "Will you make breakfast, Binghe?"

Luo Binghe perks up and leaps out from under the covers, forgetting all his fears at the sound of Shizun's voice and the sweet, rich smells of baking in the room beyond. He considers himself the luckiest soul in the world, to have Shizun's love and the delight of his company, and to taste what his husband makes when the mood strikes him; but to lie in bed and wait for Shizun to call him for breakfast is unbearable, even on the rare occasions Shizun asks him to do exactly that. If Luo Binghe had his way, he would tend his beloved day and night, and see that he never has to raise a finger; but Shizun insists that would be ridiculous, and that taking up such a way of life would make him lose face in front of Shang-shishu forever.

"He calls me the empress of the demon realm, sometimes," Shizun sniffed, not knowing that merely hearing the title from his lips made Luo Binghe want to kiss him until he forgot the rest of the world. "I have to prove him wrong."

Shizun doesn't have to do any such thing, because he and Shang Qinghua are thicker than thieves, and Shang-shishu goes around wearing the crown jewels reserved for the queen of the northern kingdom, so he has very little room to tease Shizun about being Luo Binghe's empress.

But *serving* his dear, contrary empress is what Luo Binghe loves most, which is why he cannot hold back his delight when he enters the kitchen to find Shizun laboring over something that could not, by any stretch of the imagination, possibly be called breakfast. He's making something sweet again, which means that their daily meals will be left to Luo Binghe.

"What do you want to eat today?" he asks, trying not to melt at the sight of Shizun bundled up in a set of too-large sleeping robes, over which he put on an apron borrowed from Mu-shishu's infirmary. "Congee again?"

"Put in plenty of vegetables, and broth if we have any," his Shizun says, holding up a spoon coated in something that looks like thin brown porridge. "If this turns out well, I'm going to eat enough of it to make myself sick."

Luo Binghe peers dubiously at the brown liquid Shen Qingqiu was churning in the pot, uninclined to let him eat anything that would make him sick. Shizun's palate is as fastidious as a pampered maiden's, and he never eats very much at any given meal, no matter how Luo Binghe tries to coax him into taking just a few more bites; so how dangerous must this thing be, that Shizun could eat enough to sicken him?

"Shizun," Luo Binghe begins, "I don't know—"

"Hush, *fujun*," his husband fusses, poking the tip of his nose. "Don't worry about me. And you just came back from Mobei-jun's territory last week, so you need to eat properly to get your strength back."

That mission in the northern desert had been easy—such missions usually are, especially when Mobei brings Shang-shishu with him—but Luo Binghe leans over to kiss Shizun's soft hair and goes right to work anyway, boiling soft rice in a cauldron with plenty of meat and vegetables while Shizun keeps laboring over his own strange creation on the other side of the kitchen.

"Ha!" Shizun cries, when Luo Binghe ducks into the small closet in the corner for bowls and clean teacups. "It's finished!"

He pours the brown stuff out onto a tray, and throws hot water into the steaming cauldron. After that, he puts a wire screen over the tray to keep off flies and goes to accompany Binghe while he lays out their breakfast.

"It's called chocolate," he says blissfully, breathing in the fragrance of the *yuntaishan* cloud tea Yue Qingyuan sends them—a tea Luo Binghe would rather not have at their table, knowing how Yue-shibo thinks of Shizun, but one that he likes for how Shizun likes it, all the same.



"I loved eating it when I was a child."

"What is it made of, dearest?"

Shen Qingqiu frowns. "Well, mostly beans. Qinghua sent them off to be fermented at Zui Xian, and when they were ready, we took them back to An Ding to have them peeled and roasted. Then I ground the roasted beans and mixed them with sugar and milk, and now I have left them to cool. It was a popular sweetmeat at home."

It takes until the afternoon for the chocolate to cool to Shizun's satisfaction. Luo Binghe is relieved when it does, if only because the success of this latest experiment was making his husband too excitable to eat; but when Shizun brings him a cup of warm milk later that night, in which a lump of his precious bean-sweetmeat had been dissolved, Luo Binghe discovers that *hot chocolate* (as the drink is called) is every bit as delicious as Shizun said it would be.

"It reminds me of hongdou paste, only richer and lighter at the same time. And there's a little acid, too," Luo Binghe says, surprised. "I like it very much. Will you teach me how to make it for you, *niang zi*?"

Shizun drops his chocolate into his lap and glares at him. "Binghe!" he scolds, with two spots of red burning high on his cheekbones. "If I've told you once, I've told you a *hundred* times—"

"Niang zi," Luo Binghe says again. "This disciple wishes to learn for you."

At that, his heart ceases its frowning and bursts into laughter.

"Oh, all right," Shizun smiles, radiant in the light of the golden lamp set beside their bed. "When your *shishu* sends over the next batch of cocoa beans, I'll teach you."



Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe cooked together often over the next year, for circumstances required them to leave the underground palace in the Demon Realm and move back to Qing Jing peak. It was necessary for Shizun at least to quit the Demon Realm, because he had given up his cultivation (and any means of defending himself, save for the poisoned weapons stashed in the soles of his boots) to give them a child of their own; so Luo Binghe made Mobei-jun take over his duties, and headed back to Cang Qiong Mountain to look after his husband.

Shizun didn't mind being doted on during those nine dear months. He welcomed everything Luo Binghe did for him, since he was frequently tired from cultivating their child, and when their little Hengxia came into the world, Luo Binghe learned—at long, *long* last—that he had room in his heart for more love than his husband's. He desperately wanted to love his daughter as well as his mother had loved him, *needed* to make certain that she would never have a reason to doubt how much she meant to him.

Shen Hengxia would grow up knowing that the world and everything in it belonged to her, that both of her fathers adored her; and the moment his baby took her first breath, Luo Binghe was irreversibly altered for the better. In giving him Hengxia, Shizun had turned him into something more than he used to be, and brought back the joy of his own lost childhood with his late A-Niang.

He greets his mornings with joy now, instead of the desperate, wrenching relief that consumed him whenever he opened his eyes to find Shizun still alive and breathing in his arms. Luo Binghe's world is a hundred times richer for Hengxia's presence, and *he* is a hundred times higher in his own esteem; and now, when he wakes to find his husband and daughter missing from the bed, he feels nothing but contentment.

He trusts Qing Jing peak with them both, for most of the senior cultivators here would lay down their lives for their most beloved *shixiong* and his child. Shizun and A-Xia will come to no harm here, whether Luo Binghe is present or not, and for that he would gladly stay at Qing Jing with his family for the rest of his immortal life.

"Good girl, my A-Xia," he hears Shizun exclaim from the front room. "Well done, *qian jin*! You're eating so well!"

At this, Luo Binghe rolls out of bed and scrambles into his clothes, hurrying into the receiving room two minutes later with one of his sleeves still hanging empty. But he cannot regret his haste, for the picture that greets him outside is so precious that it brings him to tears.

Shizun is sitting on the luohan bed with baby A-Xia nestled in his lap, and both of their hands and faces are covered with bits of mashed strawberry.

"Oh," Luo Binghe chokes, putting a hand on the wall as A-Xia squeals and reaches out towards him with a handful of soft red pulp. "Does she like them, A-Yuan?"

"She loves them," Shizun beams, radiant in the early sunlight streaming through the open door. "Come taste, Binghe. Yingying's mother sent them over just last night."

The strawberries are wonderfully sweet, and sweeter still when Shizun heats a small bowl of chocolate and cream and dips the berries into it. They are sweetest of all when Binghe tastes them on his husband's laughing lips, and on the tips of his fingers, and upon the rim of the unfinished mug of drinking chocolate A-Yuan leaves behind after breakfast.

Shizun swoops in the minute he finishes the flavored milk, and steals the last dregs of the chocolate back again. "There," he says smugly, plopping A-Xia into Luo Binghe's arms. "Now none of it will be wasted."


Luo Binghe strokes A-Xia's hair—chock-full of strawberry juice, by now—and closes his eyes in sheer bliss before looking back up at the dearest treasure of his life.

"With how dearly you love to kiss me, my love," he laughs, "it never would have been!"





# Hot chocolate

serves 1  by stiltonbasket

## Ingredients:

1 tablespoon unsweetened  
cocoa powder  
1 tablespoon granulated  
sugar  
2 tablespoons  
chocolate chips  
1-2 drops vanilla extract.

## Steps:

1. Place milk, cocoa powder and sugar in a small saucepan.
2. Heat over medium/medium-low heat, whisking frequently, until warm (but not boiling).
3. Add chocolate chips and whisk constantly until the chocolate chips melt and distribute evenly into the milk.
4. Whisk in vanilla extract and serve immediately.



# Chocolate strawberries

makes 30 strawberries  by stiltonbasket

## Ingredients:

One 10 ounce package of chocolate chips:  
use bittersweet, semi-sweet, or milk chocolate.  
2 pounds fresh strawberries, with stems attached. Use firm, ripe strawberries without soft spots or bruises.

## Toppings of choice:

you can use crushed peanuts, graham cracker crumbs, dried fruit, etc.

## Steps:

1. Start by washing the strawberries and then drying them well. Any remaining water will prevent the chocolate from sticking to the strawberries.
2. Line a sheet pan with parchment or waxed paper.
3. Microwave the chocolate for 30 second intervals, removing and stirring at each 30 second interval, until the chocolate has melted. Stir often, making sure not to burn the chocolate.
4. If you do not have a microwave, use a double boiler. Bring a pot of water to a low, gentle boil and place a glass bowl inside. Pour the chocolate chips into the bowl and stir constantly until melted, then remove the pot from the stove and lift the bowl out.

## To cover strawberries in chocolate:

5. hold a strawberry by the stem, dip it into the melted chocolate, and lift it out with a twisting motion so that the excess chocolate drips back into the bowl.
6. If you are using toppings, sprinkle them into the chocolate-covered strawberry at this point. Place the strawberry on the sheet pan covered with parchment paper. Repeat with the rest of the strawberries.
7. Chill the strawberries until the chocolate sets, about 15 minutes.

# instant NOODLES 4WAYS!

QWERIUM



4 times airplane bro survived on instant noodles and 1 time he didn't



# Instant Noodles 4 WAYS!

## Cheat tonkotsu

1. Cook noodles as per package(exclude seasonings)
2. In serving bowl, beat together eggs, kewpie mayo and 1/2 seasonings (or to taste)
3. Ladle in boiling water (to desired consistency) and mix
4. Add drained noodles

## rabokki

1. In a bowl, mix: 1 tbsp gochujang, 1/2 tbsp sugar, 2 tsp soysauce, 1 tsp minced garlic
2. Bring water to boil, stir in above paste and 1/2 seasoning sachet
3. Add as much tteok as wanted, simmer until soft
4. Add in noodle block, cook to desired firmness
5. Top with choice of cheese

## Chili oil ramen

1. Cook noodles (exclude seasonings)
2. In a heat safe bowl add: seasoning, 1 clove minced garlic, sesame seeds, pepper
3. Bring 3-5 tbsp neutral oil to bubbling
4. Pour over seasonings, mix
5. Mix in drained noodles

## ramen steamed egg

1. Make and eat cup noodles, save broth
2. Crack in 2 eggs (3 if large bowl of noodles)
3. Beat eggs, add pinch of pepper
4. Microwave 2-3 mins



# Five Flowers for Family

by Kuku  
Art by Ange

**“Is Binghe** still not back yet?”

Shen Qingqiu had meant the words casually enough, but his disciples started and whipped around as if he was carrying out a proper investigation of their dormitories—or as if delivering the news about Luo Binghe’s status was a life-or-death situation...which he supposed he didn’t blame them for thinking, considering his relationship with Luo Binghe.

“Shizun, hello!” Ning Yingying exclaimed, her dark eyes wide as she bowed quickly in greeting. “Unfortunately, no; A-Luo—”

“Has already returned.”

He had already begun deflating at her words, but now he turned to see his most precious disciple standing nearby. Considering the amount of time it had been since they last saw each other, he found his lips curling involuntarily from behind his fan. “Binghe,” he greeted softly. “Welcome home.”

“Mn.” Luo Binghe smiled. “Shizun, I’m home.”

The man looked as composed as he usually did, dressed in sleek black robes with elegant yet understated silver and red accents, yet his hair seemed a little messier than usual, unruly curls poking out. There was also something tired in his smile, and Shen Qingqiu thought he could see bags under his eyes.

He was quickly filled with concern, and he stepped toward the other, taking his hand. “Are you okay?”

“This disciple is completely alright. Just somewhat tired.”

“Let’s get back to the bamboo cabin then,” he suggested, already having every intention of forcing Luo Binghe to get some rest. He tugged on his disciple’s hand, and the two began walking back. “What were you doing, anyway? This master was expecting you to be back before evening.”

“This disciple was just checking in with Zhangmen-shibo. I’m sorry—did I keep Shizun waiting for long?”

He shook his head, and despite himself, he found his cheeks warming. *Let’s not make it sound like I’m the lonely wife waiting for her husband to come home, okay!? This interaction—especially in public—is far, far too embarrassing!* He looked back at Ning Yingying and the other disciples all watching them before clearing his throat. “Not too long,” he managed to say in a cool, collected tone while he fanned himself, thus salvaging some of his appearance of being an aloof shizun.

“That’s good,” Luo Binghe sighed. He rubbed at his eye absently. “This disciple felt like it took far too long though.”

While the last part was stated in a mutter, the slight upset tone to it caught Shen Qingqiu’s attention immediately. He turned back to Luo Binghe with a furrowed brow. “Why?”

“Ah, it...” The younger man trailed off, hesitating. And conveniently enough for him, the bamboo cabin came into view at that exact moment, and he walked forward so that he was now the one leading Shen Qingqiu. “It’s good to see this place again, after a whole week away.”

“Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu said in warning, giving his hand a squeeze.

He glanced back at his husband and gave him a reassuring smile. “It’s nothing, really. There’s no need for Shizun to concern himself with such trivial matters.”

“But they’re *not* trivial,” he protested. He paused, frowning. “Unless...Binghe isn’t actually happy to be back here after all?”

That made his disciple freeze, and Shen Qingqiu had to skid to a stop, lest he crash into the taller man.

He did his best to hide his smirk behind his fan, instead rounding upturned puppy dog eyes—*ha, you’re not the only one who can manage this!*—on Luo Binghe.

This made the other practically melt on the spot. “Shizun... you know this disciple didn’t mean it like that. I *am* happy to be back! In fact, I’m really happy. There was a lot more stuff going on at work, so this makes me feel better.”

“A lot going on at work?”

“Mn. There were...more things to—to *discuss*. Than usual.”

They both fell silent after that. For Shen Qingqiu, it was due to already knowing the culprit of Luo Binghe’s less-than-stellar day at work, and also knowing that said culprit was a touchy subject for the young Demon Lord.

And *that* was because the said culprit was his father, Tianlang-jun.

Since his disciple became the Demon Lord, and after the whole near-apocalypse incident with Xin Mo had passed, Luo Binghe had begun work on better unifying the demons and humans (and the demons themselves). This included having to communicate more with Tianlang-jun, and...

*Considering their first few meetings, it definitely makes sense that Binghe is still struggling to get along with his dad.* Shen Qingqiu heaved a pitying sigh in his heart. *It’s a shame, though. I can tell that Tianlang-jun is trying, and Binghe really deserves a proper family that loves him.*

Opening the door, Luo Binghe gave him another smile. “Don’t worry, Shizun. This disciple really is fine. But you must be tired and hungry after such a long day; I’ll go cook some dinner right away.”

Shen Qingqiu hadn’t stopped musing on Luo Binghe’s relationship with his father, and thus remained worried. Hearing his companion’s words—so thoughtful of his husband yet so dismissive of himself—he found his frown deepening.

“Don’t,” he suddenly said, causing Luo Binghe to freeze.

“Shizun...?”

“I’ll cook,” he declared, tugging his hand free of the other man’s.

Luo Binghe stared blankly at him for a few seconds, and when he finally reacted, it was to blink a few times. Then he said in a stunned voice, “You... You’d be willing to cook? For me?”

Feeling scrutinized under those intense dark eyes, Shen Qingqiu felt his cheeks colour. “What? You cook for this master every single day. Of *course* I’d be willing to cook for you as well.” He paused, coughing. “It just...might not be as good. As your cooking.”

“This disciple is more than okay with that!” he exclaimed, rushing forward to grab Shen Qingqiu’s hands again. Now his obsidian eyes were sparkling with all the light of the moon and stars, gazing at Shen Qingqiu like *he* was the one who’d hung that moon and those stars—like he was the one who’d given them their glow. “I’d be *honoured* to try Shizun’s cooking!”

*Well, at least he’s in a better mood now.* Unable to keep staring into those eyes that seemed bursting with love, Shen Qingqiu stared down at their intertwined fingers instead. “Mn,” he managed to respond. He could feel the blush spreading from his cheeks down to his neck.

It took a couple seconds longer before he made himself disentangle from Luo Binghe, ushering the man into their bedroom and forcing him to get some rest while he would be making food.

Now he was standing in the kitchen of Qing Jing Peak, squinting down at the stove in front of him as if it was an alien object. It might as well have been, considering how long it’d been since he’d properly tried cooking *anything* for himself.



Luo Binghe always made sure he was so well taken care of that he'd hardly had reason to set foot in here.

Hell, he'd never even cooked all that much back home in his *original* world. His parents usually hired chefs to make all their meals, and Shen Yuan was often cooped up in his room eating whatever junk was inside there.

*What to cook?* he wondered with a sigh, tapping his folded fan against his chin.

At first all he could think of were the countless cup noodles he'd boiled throughout his life, but of course that was out of the option. Some of the harder dishes his family's chefs used to make were ruled out too, considering he obviously wasn't at that skill level.

Shen Qingqiu closed his eyes, scrunching up his nose in thought as he wracked his brain.

And that was when, slowly, like the touch of a leaf on water, something light landed and created ripples inside his mind.



The image eventually cleared to reveal the kitchen back in his original home, on one of those rare times his parents had both been available for a day of hanging out with the children. Shen Qingqiu could recall himself standing on a small stool, clapping his hands on the counter excitedly as his mother instructed his eldest brother on how to cut the meat.

*"Slice them sort of thin, but not too thin. See how it looks like the pork belly is layered? That's why we call it wu hua rou—because it's like a five-layered flower."*

Ever the logical one, Shen Qingqiu remembered wrinkling his nose, his slightly too big glasses bouncing on his face. *"But that doesn't look like any flower I know,"* he'd proclaimed.

*"Stop being such a smarty-pants,"* his second oldest brother had said, elbowing him from where he was picking out radishes to peel with their father.

His mother had simply laughed. *"You're right, but it's not meant to be quite so literal. Think of it as a metaphor, Xiao Yuan. You know metaphors, right? From all your books?"*

*"Of course I know what a metaphor is!"*

His eldest brother had chuckled, ruffling his hair. *"Xiao Didi is so clever. I definitely didn't know what a metaphor was at your age."*

He puffed out his chest, preening a bit at the praise, before asking his mom, *"So what's the meaning behind this metaphor?"*

*"Think of it as one for our family,"* she'd said, smiling. *"Flowers of five layers...one for each of us."*

And that was when he'd looked around, taking note of each member of his family: his mother smiling softly at him; his eldest brother trying his best to cut through the pork belly; his second brother balancing too many radishes in his arms; his father rushing to catch the radishes before they fell; and his baby sister, sitting at the kitchen table in her high chair, clapping and gurgling cheerfully.

His heart warmed, the same way it had back then, and he let out a small, fond exhale. *Five flowers for family.*



Thinking of this memory now...and having just discovered it was the concept of family that had been bothering Luo Binghe throughout the day...Shen Qingqiu glanced down at the meat and vegetables available to him and quickly made his decision.

He was going to cook wu hua rou for Luo Binghe, in the hongshao rou style—red-braised pork belly.

With that settled, Shen Qingqiu rolled up his sleeves and got to work.

He started with the meat itself, finding a large chunk of pork belly stashed among the many potential ingredients. His first impression was, *This should be easy enough*—and yet seconds later, he was frowning down at the meat while his cleaver hovered over it.

In his memory, his mom had said to cut them thin, but not too thin. That didn't specify whether he should slice from a more horizontal or a more vertical angle, however, and just how big the pieces should be. And how many should he cut anyway, for two people?

The more he thought about it, the less he was sure, and eventually he found himself groaning and thumping his head against the counter. *Come on! This shouldn't be so hard; it's literally just chopping up some meat. Stop thinking about it so much! Just treat it like a demon attacking you so you have no time to think—only time to cut, cut, cut!*

He lifted his knife again, taking a deep breath. *Alright, here goes nothing.* He brought it down, trying to cut cleanly through the fatty pork.

His pieces ended up being somewhat uneven, but by that point, he was just relieved he'd managed to finish chopping them up. He'd also gotten a bit too into the zone so he'd finished with probably too many slices of pork belly for just him and Luo Binghe, but he told himself that was fine.

*"Okay, now the radishes,"* he murmured to himself. He turned around and began rummaging through the vegetables.

That was when he was faced with another dilemma.

*All the vegetables look the goddamn same!* There were so many—he could hardly tell them all apart. Fortunately for him, what he needed was a radish, and that at least didn't look like another leafy green. Although...the more he looked, the more he realized he wasn't entirely sure what the radish he was searching for was supposed to look like.

He fished out four different potential candidates, and he sat back to stare at them with a pensive frown. *Hmmm. One of these is probably a turnip... What are turnips shaped like again? Are they...bigger or smaller than radishes?*

He rubbed his temples, digging deep into the recesses of his mind, and he eventually thought of an old nursery rhyme. It was titled "Ba Luobo," which could mean "Pull the Radish" or "Pull the Turnip" or even "Pull the Carrot." Radishes and turnips were the ones usually depicted in children's books though, and...

*Right!* Shen Qingqiu brightened as a light bulb went off over his head.

In his own book of the nursery rhyme from childhood, the characters had always been trying to pull out a giant *white radish!*

Putting the purple and the red ones back (he still wasn't entirely sure which was a radish and which was a turnip), he was thus left with two more white radish-y vegetables.

He hemmed and hawed for a while longer before finally choosing the thicker, smoother of the two, mostly because the skinnier and wrinklier one looked a bit too much like a carrot.

He chopped the (what he hoped was) radishes as best as he could into small triangles. That was when he remembered his poor meat, which he could've been cooking this whole time, so he lugged over a giant wok and placed it on the stove.

It took a bit to figure out how to work the stove too, but eventually a fire was burning and the oil he'd drizzled into the wok was heating up. He was just about to add the meat, before remembering Luo Binghe once remarking that he always added things like garlic and ginger and sugar first, to flavour the oil.

Shen Qingqiu groaned to himself and put all the raw pork back down, quickly washing his hands to free himself of the sticky, uncomfortable feeling, before chopping some garlic and ginger. He tossed them into the wok and waited a couple minutes until he could really hear the sizzling of the ingredients and the popping of the oil, smelling their combination.

*Wasn't there something else I should add? Something like... Sugar!*

Hurrying to a few porcelain containers, he lifted one and scooped up some white powder to taste—only to gag. He'd located the salt first, and he'd put way too much on his tongue.

Spitting, he grabbed another container and found brown sugar. He rolled his eyes before lifting the lid to the third one, which contained the white sugar. He tried it just to be sure, and then he added a few spoonfuls.

While that caramelized, he slid the pork in. He hovered over it for a bit, not entirely sure what to do. He seemed to recall his mother stirring the pork inside every now and then though, so he grabbed his chopsticks and did that as well. Unfortunately, he couldn't tell how hard or often he should stir, but... *Ah well. Fake it till you make it, I guess.*

The crackling of the oil grew more aggressive, and Shen Qingqiu wagged a finger down at it, as if it was an unruly disciple.

"Don't you dare pop on me," he muttered, before moving to dig through any other potential seasonings he'd like to use. That was when he noted he should probably add some sauce to the dish.

*Soy sauce is an obvious one*, he thought, but even with that, he was now faced with the new dilemma of none of the bottles of seasoning being labelled. *Ahhh, damn it! Back in the modern world we had all the sticker labels, but here...*

He sighed and set to work, opening various bottles and jars and sniffing and tasting each one. When he finally located the soy sauce, vinegar, and cooking wine, he hurriedly added them all to the wok.

Doing so led him to recollect that his mom often added two kinds of soy sauce—the regular and the dark. When he and his siblings had asked her why, she'd explained that the latter gave the meat more colour.

Surveying the bottles, the ones with dark liquid sauces inside all appeared the same, but eventually he found another soy sauce bottle that he assumed was the dark kind. He tossed it in, and sure enough, it was richer and darker than the first soy sauce he'd used.

He added his radishes and checked the undersides of the meat. Seeing how brown the pink meat had become, he hurriedly flipped all the pieces over, before rushing to add bean sprouts, potatoes, yellow pepper, Chinese celery, onions, star anise, and Sichuan peppercorn as well, although he was a bit slow in preparing those and the pork started sizzling a lot.

"Ow!" he hissed, when some of the oil popped too much and a droplet splashed onto his skin. He drew his hand back, narrowing his eyes at the offending dish, yet he couldn't resist continuing to stir absentmindedly. *You popped on me after all—truly just like an unruly disciple!* It almost made him think of Luo Binghe after he'd come back from the Endless Abyss, when he'd actively disobeyed his shizun. *Ah well. Let's not dwell on all that. It all turned out good in the end.*

That made him realize something, and he lifted a piece of the pork with a smile. *Cooking this "flower" in the sauce like this, darkening it... It's kind of like how the white lotus Luo Binghe became darkened, isn't it? And well...*

*Luo Binghe himself is proof that even if the process is messy, the end result will be nice.*

He tasted the piece of pork he'd raised and brightened. Thankfully, after all that chaos, the dish appeared to be nearly done!

He couldn't be totally sure *when* it was exactly finished cooking, but he figured overcooking it was better (and safer) than undercooking it. So he let it simmer for a bit longer, adding some water—because he remembered his parents would do that to dilute the sauces and easily make more of it without using up all the bottles too soon.

Once satisfied at how it looked, Shen Qingqiu sat back and waited a while longer before dousing the flame. He then chopped a few tiny pieces of green onions to sprinkle on top.

Finally, he stood there silently for a few moments, in a state of delighted surprise that he'd managed to pull it off. *Sure, it's not like it's that hard of a dish to cook, but...let me have this!* Of course, now that he was gazing at the dish after everything was over, it wasn't flawless. The slices of pork were all still uneven, some too clumpy and others very tiny or thin; the sauce could've been too watery; and the pieces of vegetables also varied in shapes and sizes...

Nevertheless, *he'd* made this dish. All by himself! And with lots of love.

Now he just had to actually give it to Luo Binghe.

He flushed at the thought, especially since the presentation—and taste—were probably nowhere *near* Luo Binghe's caliber. *He's going to notice all the flaws, isn't he?* Shen Qingqiu's fingers clasped the wok a little tighter. He knew Luo Binghe wouldn't say anything—he'd probably actually love it either way, simply because his most beloved disciple was silly like that—but that didn't dispel his worries completely. *What if it ruins the gift slightly?*

Before he could doubt himself any further, however, a knock sounded on the door. "Shizun...? Are you inside?"

"Ah"—he hurried to put a lid over the dish—"y-yes, I am."

"May this disciple come in?"

"You may."

The door opened and Luo Binghe walked in, smiling as sweetly as ever. He seemed more refreshed, having combed out the tangles in his long hair and tied it back in a high ponytail, and his starlit black eyes seemed brighter too.

"Sorry the kitchen's such a mess now." In his rush, some sauces and seasonings had been spilled onto the counter, along with bits of vegetable and some oil.

"That's okay. How was cooking?" he asked, crossing the room.

Shen Qingqiu glanced down at the wok in his hands, somewhat self-conscious. "Alright," he replied. "It's...not exactly perfect though..."

"That's more than perfect," Luo Binghe said easily, beaming at him.

He furrowed his brow. "How? This master just said—"

"It's more than perfect because it was made by Shizun, and this disciple wants to eat Shizun's cooking just as it is. It doesn't need to be perfect to be perfect."

Shen Qingqiu stared at him—at this silly disciple of his who valued him so much no matter what he did. And not for the first time, Shen Qingqiu wondered how he'd won the heart of someone as amazing as Luo Binghe, who was so talented and radiant and sweet.

Instead of voicing all these embarrassing thoughts out loud though, he just cleared his throat and admonished, "Don't be so silly. How can something imperfect be perfect?"



"Mn, Shizun is always right," Luo Binghe acquiesced right away. "But this disciple knows it will be perfect, because you've been working so hard." He reached up to rub his thumb against Shen Qingqiu's cheek, grinning. "There's even sauce on your sleeves and on your face."

Said face heated up at that remark, and he ducked his head. "Come on; let's go back and eat."

"Allow me." He took the wok from Shen Qingqiu, throwing another grin back at him. "It smells heavenly. This disciple can't wait to try it!"

"Mn," he said, before freezing in mortification. "Oh no—I completely forgot to prepare rice!" *How do you even prepare rice in this world, without a rice cooker? Do you have to actually cook it?*

"There's no need to worry," Luo Binghe said, crossing the kitchen to open a container. "This kitchen is regularly stocked with rice, and this disciple specially prepared some this morning."

Shen Qingqiu relaxed at that. "Ah, Binghe...how do you do it?"

"What does Shizun mean?"

"How do you always know exactly what I need?" Shen Qingqiu couldn't help smiling fondly at him, poking his cheek. "How are you so perfectly perfect?"

Luo Binghe's eyes widened before his cheeks turned pink, and tears sprang to his eyes. "Shizun...!"

He chuckled, now poking his disciple in the forehead. "Don't even *think* about tackling me in a hug while you're lugging around that giant dish I just spent the last hour making for you!"

"Later, then."

"Mn," he agreed, affectionate and amused, scooping rice into two bowls that he could carry back to the bamboo cabin. "Later."

And so, the two finally set out for home.

The walk was short and pleasant, with the scent of the wu hua rou drifting through the air along with the pink petals and bamboo leaves in the spring breeze, turning the atmosphere sweet. Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe shared idle chatter, catching one another up on their day, and Shen Qingqiu made a note of every time his disciple's smile tightened when he had to mention his father.

Opening the door, the two set their food on the small table. *Guess it's time for the big reveal*, Shen Qingqiu thought, biting his lip. He took a deep breath and lifted the lid.

With shut eyes, he waited for Luo Binghe's reaction, but when a few seconds passed, Shen Qingqiu reopened them and peeked at the other man. "What's wrong?"

"Shizun, I'm just so thankful!" Luo Binghe exclaimed, looking up with shining black eyes. "It looks absolutely delicious!"

Shen Qingqiu glanced down. The dish, which he'd previously only seen the flaws of, actually seemed better now, placed in the house they lived in. It made it look more *homey*.

And it reminded him of home too. Of his own family.

That day when they'd all cooked together, he remembered his mother announcing, "*The wu hua rou is done!*"

He also remembered running back into the kitchen, his eyes wide in excitement at getting to see the result of all their hard work.

"Slow down!" his second brother called.

"And don't forget to wash your hands!" the oldest brother added.

Like his attempt today, the wu hua rou they'd all helped prepare hadn't been perfect either. As children with less experience than their parents, the meat and vegetables had been

similarly uneven...but he hadn't minded back then, because *they'd* made it. And now they could eat it. Together.

That alone transformed the dish into something perfect...

Luo Binghe's words from earlier settled in his brain as he recalled the same joy he'd felt on that day.

"*Mama, I can see the five-layered flower metaphor even more now!*"

"Mn~ Our Xiao Yuan is really smart," she'd replied, lips curled upwards as she patted his head.

He'd meant it too, seeing the striped pork that had soaked into alternating between caramel and russet, shining under the light from the sauce. The sauce itself was a rich hickory, accentuated by the black star anise and Sichuan peppercorn the colour of coffee. Accompanying the meat were golden radishes and potatoes, but the monotonous shades were broken up by the light green scallions and yellow bean sprouts.

His mother had paired it all with rich emerald green bok choy, grey mushrooms, and orange shrimps.

And while Shen Qingqiu hadn't had the time to make more than one dish, like this, the wu hua rou felt enough, reminding him of that day, homemade and cozy.

"Shizun, is everything okay...?"

Snapping out of his reverie, Shen Qingqiu raised his gaze to see Luo Binghe watching him.

His disciple smiled. "Has Shizun come to the same conclusion as me about how delectable the meat appears?"

He found himself blushing, and in his flustered state, he aggressively began scooping food into Luo Binghe's bowl of rice. "D-Don't say anything like that before you've even tried it!"

"Okay," Luo Binghe agreed, and he quickly tasted some of the pork before beaming. "Shizun, it tastes just as delicious as it looks."

"You..."

"This disciple means it. After all, I've already listened to Shizun and tried it, and it was sweet and juicy and soft, practically melting on my tongue."

Shen Qingqiu grabbed blindly for one of his folding fans, snapping it open to hide behind as his face grew even hotter. *This disciple...! I really can't win against him, can I!?* Coughing in an attempt to shove his embarrassment under the rug, he lifted his eyes with pink cheeks. "So...do you know why I made this dish specifically?"

Luo Binghe shook his head.

Now it was Shen Qingqiu's turn for his lips to quirk upwards as, inside this humble little dining room, he once again recollected on his family, like his two lives were connecting. For a moment, he felt a gentle breeze rustle his robes, as if one of his siblings as a child had just run past. It made his heart tremble slightly, tenderness and warmth trickling within.

"Xiao Yuan!" he could hear his second brother calling, "*Did you wash your hands properly?*"

"I did! Da-ge was there with me."

And he could also hear his da-ge's soft chuckle. "Mn. He did."

"So let's eat!" he remembered crying, already too hungry to wait any longer. "*We worked so hard on it, we should get to eat it.*"

"Hey, you say that as if you really did much work," his second brother retorted, although he was already scooping him spoonfuls of caramel-and-russet-coloured strips of pork belly.

"I helped with the bean sprouts and the stirring!"

More laughing, before his parents placed the last couple

dishes on the table and his father stated, “Time to eat!”

“Finally!” he exclaimed, and his past self and current self seemed to overlap as he tasted that homemade hongshao rou. Just as Luo Binghe had said, the meat had turned out quite tender, and being coated in the sauce, it was sweet as well as umami.

“Mama, it’s really good~” he’d sang excitedly, kicking his small legs in enjoyment, his cheek cupped in his hand.

His mother had smiled at him before reaching out to wipe some sauce from his chin. “Do you know what magical thing makes it even yummier, Xiao Yuan?”

“The sauce? The fatty meat?”

Chuckling, she’d shaken her head. “Good guesses, but it’s none of those things. It’s something else entirely.”

“So what is it, Mama?”

“It’s the taste of family.”

At this memory, he felt the same wonder fill him as it had when he’d been just a child, hearing that for the first time. And soon that wonder transformed into a giddiness and joy, with his eyes lighting up. “Really?”

“Mm-hmm~ Doesn’t it taste better because you know how hard we’ve all worked on it, and because we did it all together?”

And that was when he’d looked around the table, at all the laughing, smiling faces that surrounded him.

His eldest brother was shaking his head and giggling at his father trying to convince their younger sister to try some bok choy. “Ba, I don’t think that’s working.”

“Well, will Meimei welcome the choo-choo airplane, at least?” their dad asked, his voice exaggeratedly chipper yet also exasperated.

But their meimei just turned up her nose, too taken by the pork belly to try anything else.

“Choo-choo airplanes aren’t even a thing!” crowed the second brother.

“Well then, one of you can try!” Their father flung up his hands like he was giving up, causing the bok choy to land with a splat on the youngest sister’s hand.

They all paused, staring at her in anticipation for her reaction, before she shrieked with laughter, clapping her hands gleefully. In the midst of that, she even stuffed the bok choy into her mouth.

The table erupted into more laughter, with the brothers even cheering for their little sister like she’d accomplished something greatly profound.

That was when he turned back to his mother and grinned at her, nodding. “Mama’s right! I like it even more because I can taste the flavour of family—all five layers of it, just like the most pretty flower.”



Now, back in the present, Shen Qingqiu refocused on Luo Binghe with a softer, more reserved smile than the one he’d shown his mother as a delighted child—but his joy remained just as sunny and mellow as it did in the past. “I made this dish because it always cheered me up when I was down.”

This was true. Besides that first time making it as a family, the dish was a staple in his household. His parents often made it for different meals and Shen Qingqiu himself would try to cook it when he’d grown up and was occasionally home alone. It thus became a habit of his to prepare it when he was feeling sad or alone...

Especially since when he was a child, if his parents sometimes noticed he was in a bad mood, they would make it as a

way to help him feel better. The dish always seemed to colour his greys with its warm caramel-and-russet stripes.

But of course the dish always tasted best when they’d made it together as a family, something that was already so precious within itself, yet was made even rarer as they’d grown up and grown more apart.

Shen Qingqiu found himself suddenly missing it now, turning the sweetness in his mouth slightly bittersweet, but not enough to erase that sweetness completely. Instead, it made its taste even better *because* it reminded him of the times his family had truly felt like a *family*—since even though they’d grown apart as he’d gotten older, he knew his brothers and sister and parents all cared about him.

And now he had someone else here that he cared about too.

So Shen Qingqiu’s smile grew, his hazel eyes crescenting as he said, “This master also chose this dish because of the meat’s name.”

“Its name...?”

“Mn. With a name like *wu hua rou*, doesn’t it evoke images of flowers?”

“Ah, Shizun is right...” Seeing how bright the other man’s expression was, Luo Binghe’s own face broke out into a smile. He reached out to interlace his fingers with Shen Qingqiu’s. “Just as he always is.”

His face heated a bit at the casual compliment, but he didn’t comment on it as he continued: “Five flowers...layered upon one another, just as the meat is, turning it into something delicious to share with those you care about.”

“Like with Shizun,” Luo Binghe offered, and Shen Qingqiu nodded.

“Like with Binghe too,” he said. He paused, his eyebrows creasing as his tone became even gentler: “And like with family.”

This addition caused his beloved disciple’s expression to shutter slightly, and his dark eyes flickered downwards as he probably thought back to his time with Tianlang-jun. He sighed, withdrawing his hand. “Maybe,” he mumbled. “But I don’t need family.”

“Binghe...”

“I have Shizun.”

“You do,” he concurred, and he took the other’s hand within his own again, giving it a squeeze. When Luo Binghe glanced up at him with wide eyes, he gave him a reassuring smile. “You will always have me. But you don’t *only* have me—because all of Cang Qiong Mountain is your family too, and we are here for you.”

Luo Binghe’s expression shifted, and he opened his mouth, but worried that he may shut the idea down, Shen Qingqiu rushed onwards:

“Zh-Zhangfu, you’re as welcome here as any Cang Qiong Mountain Sect disciple is, and we will always have your back.” He swallowed, everything burning at directly addressing Luo Binghe as his husband like this. “I will always have your back. And—And this master knows it’s hard for you, dealing with Tianlang-jun after everything that’s happened...but I will be here for you during that as well.”

“Shizun, you...” Luo Binghe’s voice trembled as his jet black eyes filled with crystal tears, and his lip wobbled. For a few beats, he seemed to be at a loss for words, and in the end, he just tackled the older man in a hug. “You really are the best!” he cried, squeezing his eyes shut and burying his face in the other’s chestnut hair.

Shen Qingqiu blushed but didn’t say anything, simply reaching up to stroke his disciple’s back.



"This disciple appreciates you so, so much," he mumbled, his arms tightening around him.

"And I you," he replied soothingly.

They sat like that for a while, until Luo Binghe felt ready to pull away. As he did so, he sniffled and rubbed his eye, and the image made Shen Qingqiu's heart squeeze.

"Binghe," he murmured, causing the other man to look up questioningly. "This master...understands it can be hard. Because *family* can be hard. It's complicated and messy and sometimes even upsetting, but know that I am proud of you for working through it in spite of that.

"And...with this dish, this master hopes you can enjoy that feeling of family more—turning it more sweet than bittersweet, the way this pork is. Because you deserve all of that and more.

"I-I hope you can enjoy these flowers with even more loved ones. With those closest to you."

"Shizun..."

Shen Qingqiu let his lips tick upwards in a slightly playful fashion, and he listed his head. "One of your adoptive mother, one of me, one of Tianlang-jun, one of Zhuzhi-lang, and one of Su Xiyan... Five flowers, all for you."

Luo Binghe looked about ready to sob now, and Shen Qingqiu couldn't stop himself from clicking his tongue in affectionate exasperation.

"Aiyah, why are you crying again?" he asked, wiping his disciple's tears away with his thumb.

"Th-This disciple is just really, really, *really* happy..."

"This master is glad," he said with lips curled. He nodded at the wu hua rou on the table. "Now let's keep eating! This master didn't cook it all for it to go cold."

"Mn, let's," his disciple agreed, and they returned to their food, which they enjoyed in peaceful, snug silence—the same way they basked in one another's company.

Just as they were finishing up and Shen Qingqiu was chewing his last spoonful of pork and rice, Luo Binghe paused, staring down at one slice of the pork and its pattern of caramel and russet. "Shizun," he called.

"What is it?"



"This disciple thinks..." Luo Binghe raised his head, revealing a smile that bloomed like a radiant white lotus, stealing Shen Qingqiu's breath away. "These five flowers are the most beautiful in the world. And I am so grateful to Shizun for sharing them with me."

At his beloved's words, Shen Qingqiu felt his heart beat with this love that was both intense yet light, and he smiled back at him. "Of course," he said, before adding silently, *But really...the most beautiful flower here is you. And I'm glad that with these five flowers, you're back to shining as brilliantly as you deserve.*





# Wu hua rou

Serves 5  Total Time: 1 hour, 20 min  by Kuku

## Ingredients:

pork belly  
radish  
light and dark soy sauce  
vinegar  
cooking wine  
garlic  
ginger

## Optional:

bean sprouts  
potatoes  
yellow pepper  
Chinese celery  
onions  
star anise  
Sichuan peppercorn  
feel free to come up with  
your own!

## Steps:

For when you want to gift someone flowers and food, wu hua rou (literally five flowers meat) works perfectly! This specific recipe will be primarily in the hongshao (red-braised) style.

1. Cut the pork belly vertically into thin, 1-2 cm pieces, with each piece having a balance between the lean and fatty meat.
2. If you would like to prepare it more formally, before cooking the meat, you can blanch it first. You can do this in a pot of water—when the pot comes to a boil, take the pork belly out and set aside for later.
3. Add oil to your wok (or pan!) and some sugar. Allow the sugar to melt slightly.
4. Chop up some garlic and ginger as well for extra flavour and add it to the oil.
5. Add the pork and cook until it becomes a light brown.
6. Pour in your light and dark soy sauce—the latter is important as it gives the red-braised pork belly its distinctive colour—as well as a little vinegar and some cooking wine.
7. The other main attraction of this dish is the radish—and unlike Shen Qingqiu, be sure to double-check your radishes from your turnips! This particular recipe uses bai luobo (white radish/daikon).
8. You can now add other items, such as bean sprouts, peeled potatoes, yellow pepper, Chinese celery, onions, star anise and Sichuan peppercorn, as this recipe recommends—although you are also more than welcome to mix and match/experiment for yourself!
9. For both the peeled potato and the radish, cut them into triangular shapes before adding them to the wok.
10. Stir the pieces around, making sure they're evenly coated in the sauce, and then cover the wok and let sit on stove for 40-ish minutes or until thoroughly cooked. Stir as needed during that time, and if it gets too dry, you can always add water to thin the sauce out.
11. Once the sauce has mostly thoroughly coated the pork, you are just about done. You can also top it off with some raw chopped scallions for decoration if you so wish.

*Finally, serve and enjoy!*



An example of how you can cook wu hua rou with a variety of ways/toppings!

# Extra Mission: Waffles and Chocolate

by slashtakemylife

**A sight** was heard over at the bamboo house.

"What's the matter, Cucumber-bro? You don't usually sigh like that, what with my son waiting on you hand and foot," Peak Lord Shang Qinghua said, during one of his visits to Shen Qingqiu.

"Well, I can only do it with you," Shen Qingqiu replied, fluttering his fan while he gazed at the window with a lost look.

"Do you ever miss it?" he said suddenly.

Shang Qinghua was about to ask what he meant, but his companion's absent-minded look told him all he needed to know. "Yes, but I gained more here."

"Oh, I know. I wouldn't trade my Binghe for anything."

"But yeah, I get what you mean. I know they killed me, but I do miss my instant noodles sometimes," Shang Qinghua said.

"Chocolate is probably what I miss the most, but what I really crave sometimes is just some waffles."

"Oh yeah, definitely. But bro, you can just ask my son for that. I'm pretty sure all the ingredients are available."

"Yes, but how in the world am I supposed to explain how they need to be shaped? And I'm pretty sure you didn't include chocolate in this universe."

"I regret that so much right now."

They didn't notice a certain protagonist listening to the very end of their conversation.

"Chocolate?"

22

It was a pleasant summer morning, so Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe decided to leave home and go traveling away from Qing Jing peak. Not long after they set off, they saw a strange-looking man in the distance, and he was leading a horse-drawn cart. He seemed to be a merchant.

"Wonderful items from faraway lands!" he called. "Ask away, ask away! We have them all!"

Excitedly, Luo Binghe went his way.

"What would you like to buy today, young man?" the vendor said jovially. "Whatever it is, we have it."

"Do you know what...waffles are?" Luo Binghe asked.

Shen Qingqiu was just catching up with his husband when he heard the question and nearly fell on his ass.

Binghe overheard him talking with Shang Qinghua the other day!

"Well, they're not our specialty. But we do have the ingredients you need to make them, and we even came across a couple of waffle irons on our travels."

The merchant dug through his cart and pulled out a waffle maker. It didn't have any plastic, and neither was it electric; it was made entirely of iron, but it seemed to be shaped well enough.

He wrapped it up with a set of ingredients and gave the package to Luo Binghe. "What else would you like to buy today?" the merchant asked.

Luo Binghe was fascinated. "What about chocolate?"

"Oh, we certainly stock that!" The merchant said, pulling a tightly-sealed jar out of his cart. "Most people like it in bar form. I've run out, but we do have some cacao nibs. You can make the chocolate yourself. If you want, I'll tell you how to do it."

"Sure!"

"Perfect! Anything else?"

"No, nothing."

The merchant nodded; and after he put their purchases together and gave Luo Binghe the recipe for the chocolate, he received his payment and left.

*I can't believe the protagonist halo really did that*, Shen Qingqiu thought; but it didn't matter. He had his waffles and chocolate!

When they returned to Qing Jing Peak, Luo Binghe went straight to the kitchen while Shen Qingqiu headed back to the bamboo house. Luo Binghe was used to this, since he did all the cooking and loved it. He started with the chocolate, since that was the more complicated recipe, but then he heard a noise and jumped up in shock. His shizun—no, his *husband*—was in the kitchen with him, wearing his hair in a low ponytail with a handkerchief tucked over his hair.

"Shizun!" Shen Qingqiu squinted at the name. "H-husband, what are you doing?"

"Helping you, of course."

"This husband can prepare the food like I always do. Shizun shouldn't worry about it."

"Can't I have the little pleasure of cooking with my husband? Besides, waffles are easy to make."

Shen Qingqiu went over to read the recipe, not noticing that Luo Binghe had gone still behind him. At last, he frowned at the sudden silence and looked up to find his husband staring at him in a daze.

"Binghe, what's the matter?"

Luo Binghe shook his head and smiled broadly. "Nothing, I'm just really happy."

"L-let's just cook this." Shen Qingqiu shyly looked away, and tried to focus on the recipe.

*Oh, he thought, looking over the instructions. You're supposed to separate the dry ingredients from the wet ones. Honestly, the few times I tried, I just poured everything into the same bowl.*

Shen Qingqiu fetched a large bowl from the cupboard, and mixed some flour and salt with sugar and baking powder before setting the bowl aside.

"It's time to heat up the waffle iron," he called.

"Oh! Let me do that for you!" Luo Binghe rose from where he was hunched over grinding the cacao nibs and went to place the waffle iron over the fire.

"This one will check on it constantly. Husband can go back to mixing."

"Very well, thank you Binghe." Shen Qingqiu looked at the rest of the instructions. "Looks like it's time for the eggs."

He grabbed another bowl and cracked the eggs. However, he wasn't really used to breaking eggs, and most of the egg white spilled onto his hands.

"I can do that for you, A-Yuan!" Luo Binghe beamed and tried to move closer.

"No, no." Shen Qingqiu lifted an egg-stained hand to stop him. "I've battled worse, this task can't be greater than this master," he said, turning back to the eggs.

His husband could only smile softly while he saw the eggshells land in the bowl and noticed that his shizun didn't seem to be bothered by them.

"Now the milk...where did I put it? It should have been stored with the butter and vanilla."

Shen Qingqiu cleaned his hands with a cloth and went to grab the milk bottle from their pile of groceries. While his back was turned, Luo Binghe took the chance to remove the eggshells and quickly went back to grinding the cacao.

"Next, stir everything together."

Shen Qingqiu stirred a little too quickly, leaving a couple of lumps in the bowl.



Luo Binghe knew the batter needed to be stirred further; so when Shen Qingqiu left to grease the waffle iron, he slipped back to stir the batter until it frothed.

Shen Qingqiu turned around and found Luo Binghe adding sugar to the chocolate paste. He paid no mind, and picked up the bowl of batter so he could start making the waffles.

"A-Yuan! Let me handle the waffle maker!" Luo Binghe said, grabbing the bowl.

"Binghe!"

"A-Yuan can check if the chocolate is done," Luo Binghe continued, pointing to the row of brown sweets waiting on the counter.

Excited to finally taste some chocolate, Shen Qingqiu sampled a little with a spoon and brought it to his mouth, moaning out loud at the flavor. He heard metal creaking as he finished up the second spoonful, but everything seemed to be fine when he turned around.

"Shizun, it still needs a water bath. I already have the pans on the stove, so just place the paste inside and stir it."

"Of course!" Shen Qingqiu happily did as he was told, and watched as the paste became more and more like chocolate as it melted further in the heat.

A little while later, the chocolate and waffles were finished.

"I'll go fetch the plates," Binghe said, sliding the last waffle out of the iron. "Shizun, go sit down, and I'll bring everything to the table."

"I'll cut some of the fruit we bought, so we can have it with the waffles."

"Fruit? Husband said the waffles were to be eaten with chocolate."

"It can be eaten with anything," Shen Qingqiu said, choosing some raspberries and blueberries. While he rinsed the berries, Luo Binghe divided the waffles between two plates, giving one to Shen Qingqiu so he could decorate it with fruit.

"We'll add chocolate to the other one, and you can try both to see which one you like better," he suggested. "If Binghe likes both, we'll split them."

Luo Binghe quickly went to the pot and carefully placed the chocolate syrup on the other plate.

"Perfect! Time to eat!"

Shen Qingqiu immediately reached for a chocolate waffle, while Luo Binghe happily took a fruit one. Shen Qingqiu took one bite and sighed at the rich taste.

"Just as I remember." He sat still, savoring the taste, until he turned to his husband and found Luo Binghe staring at him.

"Aren't you going to taste yours?" Shen Qingqiu asked.

Binghe nodded and quickly took a bite. His eyes went wide. "Shizun! It's delicious!"

Shen Qingqiu frowned.

"Husband!" Luo Binghe corrected.

"Here, have some with chocolate."

Luo Binghe was ready to receive some of the chocolate waffles on his plate, but he gladly took the offered bite directly from Shen Qingqiu's chopsticks. Luo Binghe didn't know what made him happier: the delicious waffles, or the fact that his husband was feeding him.

"Husband, another bite please!" It was definitely the latter.

Shen Qingqiu huffed, but he cut another piece and fed it to Binghe, who was ready with an open mouth and a blissful smile.

## Waffles

from Allrecipes.com  by slashtakemylife

### Ingredients:

2 cups all-purpose flour  
1 teaspoon salt  
4 teaspoons baking powder  
2 tablespoons white sugar  
2 eggs  
1 ½ cups warm milk  
⅓ cup butter, melted  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

### Steps:

1. In a large bowl, mix together flour, salt, baking powder and sugar; set aside.
2. Preheat waffle iron to desired temperature.
3. In a separate bowl, beat the eggs. Stir in the milk, butter and vanilla.
4. Pour the milk mixture into the flour mixture; beat until blended.
5. Ladle the batter into a preheated waffle iron. Cook the waffles until golden and crisp.

*Serve immediately.*

# QUIMBOLITOS

*\*Aprox. 15 units*



## INGREDIENTS

- 340 g of all purpose flour
- 6 eggs
- 114 g of sugar
- 250 g of salted butter
- 1 tsp of vanilla extract
- 2 tsp of baking powder
- Banana leaves

1. Mix the flour with the baking powder.
2. Beat the eggs with butter and sugar until combined.
3. Slowly, add the dry ingredients to the mixture of eggs, butter and sugar until smooth.
4. Add vanilla extract and mix.
5. On one banana leaf, place 2 tablespoons of the batter.
6. Fold the two right and left outward sides of the leaf on top of the batter. Then fold the top and bottom part of the leaf under.
7. Repeat until there is no batter left.
8. Place all of your quimbolitos on a tamale steamer and steam in medium heat for 20 minutes or until fluffy.





# Rocky Road Brownies

^mance

## Brownie Batter

4 ounces unsweetened chocolate  
3/4 cup unsalted butter  
4 eggs  
2 cups sugar  
1 scant cup all-purpose flour  
1/2 teaspoon baking powder  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

## Chocolate Frosting

1/4 cup butter  
3 ounces cream cheese  
1 ounce unsweetened chocolate  
1/4 cup milk  
2 1/4 cups confectioners' sugar  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
2 cups mini marshmallows  
1 cup salted roasted peanuts  
(Optional) a sprinkle of flaky salt

1. Preheat oven to 375°F/190°. Spray or grease 9-in square baking pan

2. In small microwave safe bowl, combine the chocolate and butter and heat on high for approx. 1 minute; stir until smooth.

3. In large bowl, with an electric mixer, beat eggs and sugar until light, approx 2 minutes. The color should be near white and the mixture should have a lot of air. Beat in the flour, baking powder, and vanilla. Then beat in the cooled chocolate mixture.

4. Pour batter into prepared pan. Bake in center of the oven for about 30 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out *almost* clean.

Let cool.

5. In a small heavy sauce pan, combine the butter, cream cheese, and milk. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally until melted and combined. NOTE! at this stage the mixture can look lumpy and slightly odd, keep mixing and leave it on the heat. It will come together if you keep stirring and heating it! Remove from heat and transfer to bowl. Add sifted confectioners sugar and vanilla and beat with an electric mixer until smooth. Stir in marshmallow and the peanuts. Immediately spread frosting on brownies. Top with optional sprinkle of flaky salt.









# Tiramisu

by Winterstar1412

Lan Wangji stepped into the small cafe with the gentle chime of the bell above the door signaling his arrival. Sitting down in his customary spot by the window, Wangji pulled his papers and art supplies out of his messenger bag, spread them out over the small, two-person table, leaving only a small patch of clear space on his right side.

Lan Wangji sat quietly, sketching a round white bunny doing a variety of different things: fighting monsters, snowboarding, eating... anything he could think of. He didn't look up from his sketchpad until he heard the clack of a plate set down on his table. He looked up and nodded in greeting to a smiling Shen Yuan who was dressed in his self-imposed uniform of a white button up, black slacks, and an apron.

"Hey, Wangji! Here's your usual! You're in luck today, Binghe just made a new batch of tiramisu last night. How have you been? Have you read any more of my book suggestions since the last time I saw you?"

"Mn. I understand your point about the Immortal Demons series now."

Shen Yuan's eyes lit up, "I know, right!? If the author had bothered to develop anyone other than the main character, we could have had such a beautiful story! He could have..."

And just like that, Shen Yuan was off on one of his usual impassioned rants. Well accustomed to these rants, Wangji quietly began to eat his tiramisu as Shen Yuan went on about how the story could have changed with a little more focus given to the side character's motivations, going on about foils, backstories, and the potential for more if only... if only a lot of things really. Shen Yuan grumbled and griped about how inconsistent characterization and poorly developed worlds lead to some rather large plot holes while using some seemingly miniscule details from the series to piece together a richer story. Despite how careful Shen Yuan was to preserve the major plot points, Wangji thought the story Shen Yuan was weaving together was more engaging with more understandable characters and the world developed to the point that it just begged to be explored.

Every time this happened, some part of Wangji wondered why Shen Yuan decided to work as a waiter in his own cafe rather than try to become an author, editor, or book reviewer. He had an obvious passion for the characters and story worlds he read about, even if that passion mostly manifested itself in disparaging comments and remorse over lost potential. Wangji had always been impressed by the sincere thought and care Shen Yuan devoted to each series, even back when they'd first met.

Shen Yuan kept expanding on the world of Immortal Demons until he was eventually called away by the ding of Luo Binghe's bell. Once Shen Yuan had hurried back to the counter, Wangji turned back to his sketches, staring at them with the vain hope that one of them would catch his attention and inspire a story.

Nothing.

With a sigh, he picked his pencil back up and filled yet another page of his notebook with his little white rabbit picking herbs, riding a bike, singing, traveling, and swimming. His rabbit was doing various things, but Wangji didn't feel particularly inspired by any of the scenes he'd drawn.

Out of ideas, he put his sketchbook down and picked his fork back up, idly glancing at the small children's corner as he took another bite of his tiramisu.

The children's corner consisted of a blue carpet, two bean bag chairs, and two boxes- one for children's books, and one for toys. The corner had a handful of regular visitors, and Wangji liked watching the children play when he was working on a picture book. Sometimes he would be struck with a sudden bolt of inspiration, but even if he wasn't, watching children play was a good break.

He loved writing children's books, honestly he did, but he personally thought that it was a little far out of his range of expertise. Wangji has never spent any significant time with children that weren't related to him, even after becoming a children's author. This, compounded by his somewhat unconventional upbringing made him feel wholly unqualified as a children's author. Watching children play warmed something inside of him and simultaneously reminded him of who he was writing for and gave him some insight into what interested them.

Wangji startled a bit as he felt a small weight crash into his leg. He looked down to see a small child holding a rabbit plushie. The kid looked up from where he was hugging Wangji's leg, gave him a grin, and started to cheerfully launch questions at Wangji.

"Hi! What are you doing? What are you eating? I see you sitting here every time I'm here. Why do you always sit here?"

Wangji was not prepared to interact with a child today. If he wanted to play with a child, he would be at his cousin's house with Jingyi, not here at the comparatively quiet cafe. The boy seemed vaguely familiar. Wangji had seen him playing in the kids corner before, usually quietly playing with a felt butterfly doll or leafing through one of the picture books. Did someone give him too much sugar today? Speaking of... Where are the boy's parents? Shouldn't there be someone going 'what are you doing with my son?' or frantically pulling this child away from him?

Wangji let out a nearly imperceptible sigh, recalling with some despair Huaisang's perpetual amusement at the fact that Wangji still didn't know how to interact with children despite making a living by writing a decently successful series of children's books. Jingyi being the sole exception, as his little cousin seemed to be impressed by nearly anything Wangji did. If this boy did not leave his table crying, Wangji would count it as a success.

He set down his fork and handed his sketchbook to the boy. "I was drawing."

The boy looked at his rough sketches and Wangji was somewhat surprised to see a spark of recognition in the boy's large brown eyes. The boy looked up at him with stars in his eyes and exclaimed "Bunny! This is the bunny from Cloud Bunny! Do you like these books too, mister?"

Wangji nodded, idly wondering if this boy understood the idea of authors yet. "I was drawing Cloud Bunny doing different activities, trying to predict what would happen in the next book. What do you think will happen?" Wangji asked the boy, curious to see what the boy would come up with.

"I think that Cloud Bunny and Lotus Crow will grow carrots!" the boy exclaimed, his rabbit plushie waving around in the air along with his arms as he bounced in place. "Xian-gege always says that people need rest after working hard, and Lotus and Cloud Bunny worked so hard to beat the Great Turtle!"

Wangji nodded along with the boy's eager explanation as he internally wondered what the boy was going on about. Lotus Bunny? Great Turtle? Who were these characters? The boy spoke to them with such familiarity, but Wangji had never heard of them. Just what was he thinking of?



Wangji took another glance around and, not seeing any frantic parents looking for their children, he nodded to the seat opposite of him. "Would you like to sit down? I would love to hear more about Cloud Bunny and Lotus Bunny's carrot farm."

Wangji quickly cleared the table of art supplies as the boy clambered up onto the chair. Once he finally got up he looked at the table and exclaimed "Cake!"

Wangji blinked at the exclamation, then nodded.

"I get this cake every time I come here. It is called a tiramisu. Would you like to try a bite?"

The boy nodded excitedly and opened his mouth wide "Ahhh~". Wangji scooped up a bit of the cream and carefully fed it to him, prompting a happy hum from the boy. The boy looked up at him with large eyes and seemed to be on the verge of asking him for another bite when an arm came out of nowhere and scooped the boy up.

Wangji looked up to see a smiling man in a paint stained shirt and a black blazer tickling the boy before flipping the boy around and settling him on his hip. The boy just giggled and gave the man a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

"Aiyah, A-Yuan! Why are you here stealing bites of cake from this nice gege?" the man asked, booping the boy (A-Yuan?) on the nose before turning to Wangji with an apologetic look on his face. "I'm sorry about him, I wasn't watching him closely enough. I hope he didn't disturb you too much."

"He was no problem, he provided me with a pleasant distraction."

A-Yuan nodded vigorously, pulling on the man's sleeve. "Xian-gege! Xian-gege! This mister likes Lan Bunny too!"

The man turned to him with a raised eyebrow and regarded him with a scrutinizing look before his face cleared in recognition. "Ah! I recognize you, you're the author of the Lan Bunny, aren't you!"

Wangji nodded his head silently.

"Wow! I never thought I'd meet you here of all places! Your author's picture doesn't do you justice! And here all this time, I thought that those pictures were faked. No way someone looks as good as that, I thought, and here you are, proving me wrong."

"Shameless!" Wangji muttered, staring at the suddenly fascinating piece of tiramisu. BingHe had a habit of sprinkling cocoa powder onto the top layer of cream instead of making a solid layer of it. The little sprinkles of cocoa powder were always quite pretty and this time the sprinkling of cocoa powder almost looked like leaves.

The man let out a delighted laugh, silver eyes dancing with mirth. "Okay, okay, I won't tease you. I'll keep my comments about your looks to myself. Your name was..." the man's head tilted to the side in thought, "Lan Wangji, right? I'm Wei Wuxian. How did you end up in a sudden conversation about Lan Bunny with A-Yuan?" he asked as he sat down in the chair opposite from Wangji, readjusting the boy to sit on his lap.

This shameless man. Wangji looked to the side where his sketchbook was innocently laying on the table, refusing to look Wei Wuxian in the face as he admitted, "I was having trouble deciding what the next installment should entail. I drew Lan Bunny engaged in many different activities, but none of the ideas really satisfied me. I was looking for inspiration when A-Yuan came up to me, so I thought I would ask him."

Wei Wuxian nodded in understanding. "I get what you mean. You already have Lan Bunny doing a ton of different things in the ten books that you've published so far. You were bound to run out of ideas sooner or later."

"So? What did A-Yuan tell you? Was he any help?" the man asked, an inquisitive look on his face as he flipped his long ponytail over his shoulder.

"He actually told me something that confused me. He said that Lan Bunny and Lotus Crow should start farming carrots since they worked so hard to defeat the Great Turtle, but I don't remember creating such characters." Wangji explained, hoping Wei Wuxian would be able to explain what A-Yuan was talking about.

Wei Wuxian let out another laugh, leaning forward to cradle A-Yuan close and smush their cheeks together, rocking from side to side on their seat. "Oh? You want Lan Bunny and Lotus Crow to grow some carrots, A-Yuan?"

A-Yuan turns to face him with a dimpled grin, giggling as he nodded emphatically, "Yes! Carrots!"

Wei Wuxian gives him a quick peck on the cheek before turning his attention back to Wangji, "You must be awfully confused."

Wangji nods slowly, somewhat charmed despite himself.

"Well, I babysit A-Yuan pretty regularly, and I read him your books all the time. Eventually, A-Yuan started to play make-believe as Lan Bunny, but I needed a role, so I became Lotus Crow. We've gone on some great adventures, and recently slayed the Great Turtle-my brother- before collapsing in exhaustion!" Wei Wuxian explained brightly, mouthing "for a nap" over A-Yuan's head.

Wangji nodded in understanding.

Wei Wuxian grinned at him, and, with a teasing glint in his silver eyes, asked "So? What do you think? Am I going to see Lan Bunny grow carrots in the future? Is he going to meet Lotus Crow?"

Wangji felt his ears go hot as he experienced the odd sensation of being both annoyed and charmed by the audacity of the man in front of him. Even so, he tilted his to the side and thickened his face before saying "Perhaps, if you were willing to become a co-author and make sure that I stay in line with your vision."

The Wei Wuxian sputtered for a moment, his face going red as his hands flailed about, and Wangji graciously allowed himself to be distracted by wiping a splotch of cream off A-Yuan's cheek while Wei Wuxian recovered his wits enough to laugh and say, "Man, haven't you ever heard of a joke? I was teasing you. You don't have to be so serious. How did a fuddy duddy like you ever become a children's author?"

Wangji blinked. "On accident."

"No way! Seriously?"

"I originally wrote and drew picture books for my cousin. A friend of mine," Wangji's eyes drifted towards Shen Yuan for a brief moment, "asked to borrow a packet from me, and a few months later he asked me if I was willing to have it published."

He assured me that he would take care of all the details, I just needed to make a couple corrections and sign on a dotted line," Wangji was silent for a moment before he said, "We both underestimated how popular the books would be."

At that Wei Wuxian threw his head back in yet another laugh, prompting A-Yuan to look up from where he was sneaking another fingerful of the tiramisu' cream. He tilted his head back and seemed to be looking up at the bottom of his face. "Xian-gege?"

Wei Wuxian calmed down and gave A-Yuan a soft pat on the cheek. "Oh, I'm alright, A-Yuan. It's just fun to hear about how your favorite Lan Bunny came to be."

A-yuan nodded, and went back to playing with his stuffed rabbit, getting some of the cream in its fake fur as he tried to share a bite with it.



Wei Wuxian leaned forward as much as he could with A-Yuan in his lap and asked “So? Has your muse run out? Why are you asking a toddler what you should write next?”

“In the past, I would simply ask my cousin what he would like the bunny to do, but he will be turning four soon, so I want to surprise him with a story that he doesn’t know.”

Wei Wuxian nodded in understanding. “But because he had a hand in all the stories that came before, you don’t really know what you should write for him now.”

Wangji inclined his head in agreement.

Wei Wuxian tilted his head to the side. “So? Do you think your cousin would like Lotus Crow?”

Wangji gave it a moment’s thought and decided that Jingyi would probably like it if Lan Bunny got a friend, especially if he got one at the same time.

“I think he might. Would you and A-Yuan be willing to tell me more about Lotus Crow? And, if I get permission from my cousin, would you be willing to bring A-Yuan to the birthday party? I think he might become good friends with my little cousin.”

Wei Wuxian blinked in shock, and Wangji got the creeping suspicion that he was teasing and didn’t really expect him to consider using the character he created to fuel A-Yuan’s games.

Wei Wuxian recovered quickly though, shooting Wangji a blinding grin and a casual, “Of course, that sounds like fun!”

He seemed like he was about to go on when he was distracted by a gentle voice calling, “A-Xian!”

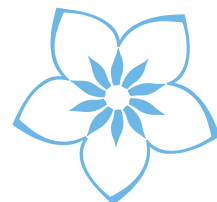
Wangji turned towards the voice to see the lady Shen Yuan hired to make drinks standing by the door, apparently waiting for Wei Wuxian. She must have just finished her shift.

“Ah! A-Jie, wait a minute, I’ll be right there!” Wei Wuxian called as he tore a napkin out of the dispenser and stole one of Wangji’s pens to quickly scribble down a phone number. “Text me, okay? Let’s meet up again, and talk more.”

With that he quickly swept A-Yuan up into his arms, bounced the boy on his hip, making him laugh, and told him “Say goodbye to the nice gege, A-Yuan, it’s time to leave!”

The toddler waved his rabbit’s paw in Wangji’s direction cheerfully chirping out “Bye bye gege!” and just like that, they were gone, Wei Wuxian sweeping out of the cafe like a whirlwind.

Wangji carefully saved the phone number to his phone, before looking down at his slightly smushed tiramisu (courtesy of A-Yuan) and smiled to himself. This seemed promising.



# ❖ *Tiramisu* ❖

## Ingredients

1 1/2 cups heavy whipping cream  
8 oz room temperature mascarpone cheese  
1/3 cup granulated sugar  
1 tsp vanilla extract  
1 1/2 cups cold espresso

4 large eggs  
2 tbsp + 2/3 cups white sugar  
1 cup all-purpose flour  
1/2 tsp baking powder  
Cocoa powder for dusting the top

## Lady Fingers

- Preheat oven to 400F
- Line two 17 x 12 inch baking sheets with baking parchment.
- Separate the eggs whites from the yolks.
- Place the egg whites in a bowl and beat on high until soft peaks start to form.
- Slowly add 2 tablespoons of the sugar and continue beating until stiff and glossy.
- In another bowl, beat the egg yolks and remaining sugar. Whip until thick and very pale in color.
- In a small bowl, whisk together the flour and baking powder. Fold half the egg whites into the egg yolk mixture. Fold in the flour, then add the remaining egg whites.
- Transfer the mixture to a 1/2 inch round pastry bag and pipe ladyfinger stripes. Alternatively, spread it onto the sheet to cut after baking. Bake for 8 minutes.

## Tiramisu assembly

- Add the whipping cream to a mixing bowl and beat on medium speed (using an electric mixer).
- Slowly add sugar and vanilla and continue to beat until stiff peaks form.
- Fold in mascarpone cheese until combined. Set aside.
- Line an 8x8" or similar size pan with homemade lady fingers. Spoon coffee onto the lady fingers.
- Smooth half of the mascarpone mixture over the top. Lay another layer of lady fingers and spoon coffee onto them.
- Smooth the remaining mascarpone cream over the top.
- Dust cocoa powder to taste over the top.

Refrigerate for at least 3-4 hours or up to overnight before serving!

*Note: If A-Yuan and the Lans are not having any, you can add 3 tbsp of flavored liquor like coffee flavored liquor (Kahlua or DaVinci brands), Marsala wine, or brandy to the coffee.*

*Also, if you have A-Yuan over for dessert, use decaf!*







# 汤圆 Tang Yuan

**130 g glutinous rice flour**  
**3 tablespoon boiling water**  
**4 tablespoon room temperature water**

In a mixing bowl, stir flour while pouring hot water into it slowly  
Add room temperature water bit by bit  
Knead with your hands until a smooth, soft dough forms.  
Divide and form small balls



Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Gently slide in some Tang Yuan  
Push them around with the back of a cooking spoon to prevent  
them from sticking to the bottom of the pot.

When all the balls start to float on the surface, cook for a further  
minute.

Dish out (along with some liquid) and serve warm.

Tang Yuan can be filled with  
various sweet pastes, fruits or  
simply with sugar and  
cinnamon





# Pineapple Tarts

by chococaraz

**Lan Zhan** wasn't sure why he was here in the first place.

Staring distastefully at the crowded room, full of bright light and noisy chatter, he can only assume this was some sort of punishment from Huan-ge for interrupting his date last time.

(How he was supposed to know Lan Huan had invited Mingjue to his apartment for more than just coffee? His poor violated eyes, argh!)

Sidestepping some gossiping aunties, he found a bench and work table with his brother's name on it. The ingredients for today's class were ready and waiting for him.

He sighed.

Just because of a pointed comment from Uncle about his nephews' inability to cook, lamenting that he would never get to taste his niece-in-law's cooking (ignoring the fact that both Lan Zhan and Lan Huan were gay), Huan-ge literally rolled up his sleeves and enrolled in a series of cooking classes with the hopes of working his way up to be an amateur chef. And by the way, he was failing the course.

Huan-ge shanghai'd Lan Zhan into attending his cooking class as a replacement, due to an important meeting he couldn't skip; but both of them knew who Lan Huan was really meeting that afternoon. That, and the fact that Mingjue's little brother (and local social butterfly) just posted a picture of their brothers on a bubble tea date at the garden across town.

Lan Zhan sighed again as he removed his jacket and put on an apron, taking note of the recipe laid out on the table. Apparently, they were to learn how to make a variant of the pineapple pastry, Fengli Shu.

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For a moment, an almost-forgotten memory of a woman in a kitchen teaching him and Huan-ge how to make the pastries popped into his head.

Shaking his head, Lan Zhan started measuring out the ingredients, not realizing that someone had taken the table beside his until he heard a child laugh.

His head snapped up to see a small boy peeking up at him from the next table over. "Gege, you look so pretty," the little voice said in awe.

Lan Zhan could feel his ears turning red as another voice cut through. "Aiyo, Yuan-er, what did I say about flirting with strangers?"

"But, baba, gege is very pretty!!" The child protested as a pair of hands picked him up. Lan Zhan raised his eyes and immediately froze as he stared into the most brilliant pair of sterling silver eyes he had ever seen. He jerked back in reflex, taking in the tanned skin, blinding smile, the red ribbon tying back the man's short ponytail.

"Aiyo, even if the Shuai-ge is pretty, you shouldn't bother him before he introduces himself. What if the pretty-ge likes my Yuanyuan and decides to whisk you away? What will Baba do?" the young man playfully teased, as the boy grabbed him around the neck and hugged him close.

"No, baba, A-Yuan won't leave you!" The two laughed.

*S-Shuai-ge?!!*

Embarrassed and feeling a bit bewildered, Lan Zhan turned around to see if anyone was going to scold them for the noise. But judging from how everyone was behaving (most were ignoring the duo while the others giggled at their antics) it was something that happened often at the class.

"You're new." Lan Zhan finally realized that the handsome stranger was talking to him. "But newbies have their own spots in front, and this is Huan-ge's place," he mused.

*Huan-ge?!*

"My Ge couldn't come today so he asked me to substitute for him." In his mind, Lan Zhan was screeching at the fact that his brother had never told him about his handsome course-mate. "I'm Lan Zhan."

"Oh, you're the little brother that he always talks about!" *Huan-ge talks about me with the handsome stranger? Why?!* "It's nice to finally put a face to his stories. I thought he was joking when he told me how handsome you were." *Okay Huan-ge, you're still my favorite.*

Lan Zhan could only nod at him, shyly retiring back to his workstation. He furtively watched as the stranger helped his son with his apron, taking note of his ringless left hand. (Single parenting? Divorced? Not subscribing to the social norm of wearing a wedding ring?)

Noticing Lan Zhan's intense look, the stranger finally looked at him with another grin adorning his face. "Sorry, I had to make sure Yuan-er is properly covered this time. We don't want a repeat of last time, do we, Yuanyuan?" he grinned down at his son, who grinned back adorably.

"It was fun!"

"Yes," his father retorted, "it was fun until Qing-jie found out and yelled at us."

"Anyways, I'm Wei Ying and this is Wei Yuan." He patted his son on the head. "Really nice to meet you Lan Zhan!" Lan Zhan almost swooned over how firm his handshake was.



Lan Zhan hated the class. He was so confused as the cheery teacher started the lesson, calling out instructions and not explaining what they actually meant.

What was sifting supposed to mean? Lan Zhan turned and saw Wei Ying pouring the dry ingredients into the metal, rounded thing and Yuan shaking it gently. He quickly mimicked the duo, making sure to dump the residue in an empty bowl. Next, according to the instruction list, he had to mix the wet and dry ingredients together and fold them into a dough. He bit his lips, wondering if he should use a spoon to fold the dough or use his hands.

A bright peal of laughter distracted him from his latest dilemma. He was surprised to see the father-son duo mixing up the ingredients together with their (thankfully) gloved hands, laughing as their hands hit each other in the small bowl. Wei Ying grinned at him as A-Yuan playfully headbutted him on the chin, covering his face in flour.

Smiling back, Lan Zhan turned to his mix, and started mixing. With a spoon.

"I don't think that's the right way to do it, Lan Zhan." He was startled to see the two standing beside him, frowning at his sad mixture. "You have to mix it all together into a homogenous mass," Wei Ying explained, displaying his resting cookie dough.

"Use your hands!" A-Yuan mimed grabbing at something. "And mix-mix!"

Lan Zhan sighed but finally gave in, gingerly trying to mix the dough with his hands. Judging from Wei Ying's expression, he was doing it wrongly.

"May I?" Wei Ying gestured at the bowl, and Lan Zhan silently passed it to him.

Lan Zhan gave himself a few seconds to admire the way Wei Ying's arm muscles worked the dough before turning to the sticky pineapple paste that he was supposed to be rolled into small balls. A-Yuan cheerfully showed him how, grinning as he nibbled some of the paste he was working on.

The father-son duo had, at one point, moved their bowl to his work table, working together to create uneven lumps



of pastries, which hilariously looked better than Lan Zhan's evenly-sized pastry balls.

"How on earth did you manage to egg wash them cleanly?" Wei Ying asked in dismay as they compared their baking trays side by side. The splatters and splotches on his tray looked jarring on the glossy finished pastries resting from the hot oven. "Are you sure this is your first time making these?"

"I prefer to do things as tidily as I can." Lan Zhan smiled as Wei Ying huffed beside him. "Is it all right for A-Yuan to run around like that?" He turned to the little boy who was running around in the hot kitchen.

"Oh, A-Yuan is used to it and the aunties don't mind. See?" he laughed as A-Yuan came back with a plate of pastries the laughing auntie had given him. "Now we just need to pack them up, Yuan-er, then we can go home."

Lan Zhan found himself walking out the class accompanied by the father-son duo, watching them greet their fellow classmates as they made their way out. As the last of the aunties ducked away to the nearest bus stop (not before loading all of them with the extra pastries she made), A-Yuan let go of Lan Zhan's hand and grinned up at his father.

"Ying ge!! Can we go by the pet shop before going home? I want to tell the Xiao Tuzi about the class."

*Wait, what?*

Wei Ying grinned back at the kid. "Sure. But only for five minutes," he warned playfully, "or we'll be late for dinner again and then Qing jie won't let me babysit you again."

With a loud 'Yay!' A Yuan ran forward to the pet store in front of them, leaving Lan Zhan staring incredulously at Wei Ying.

Wei Ying, used to the look, only smiled wider. "Sorry, you must be confused, right? A Yuan is not actually my son. His cousins are my neighbors and I help out from time to time. He invited himself to my classes and well, we always found it funny everyone thinks we're family. Plus we got a lot of freebies out of it, so," he shrugged.

"Oh." Lan Zhan didn't know what to think, especially when Wei Ying passed him a crumpled tissue with a phone number scribbled across it. "Your brother always raved about the little brother he wanted to introduce me to, so I'm glad we finally met. Call me, okay?"

With a playful air kiss aimed at him, Wei Ying took off, leaving Lan Zhan with red cheeks and a racing heart.

Hmm...

Lan Zhan wonders how much teasing he would have to endure if he asked Huan-ge to let him come to the classes for the rest of the season.

## Classic Pineapple Tart

✿ by chococaraz ✿

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### Dry Ingredients:

350g all-purpose flour  
1 tbsp corn starch  
1/4 tsp salt  
3 tbsp confectioners' sugar or  
icing sugar or powdered sugar  
1 tbsp milk powder  
1 tbsp custard powder

### Wet Ingredients:

1 teaspoon vanilla paste  
350g unsalted butter  
1 egg  
Pineapple paste (for filling)  
1 egg yolk + 1 teaspoon of oil  
a few drop of yellow lemon  
food coloring for eggwash

### Steps:

1. Sieve the dry ingredients in a big bowl or container. Soften the butter to room temperature.
2. Combine the flour mixture, butter, vanilla paste and egg together. Knead to form the dough. The dough is ready when it doesn't stick to the hand. If the dough is too crumbly or dry, add a little bit more butter (about 1 tablespoon) until the dough is easy to work with.
3. Divide the dough and pineapple jam (filling) each into 30 equal rounds. Flatten the pastry dough with your palms and put the pineapple filling in the middle and use the dough to cover the filling. Use your palms to round it up and then shape it into a roll about 1 1/2-inch long shape. Use a small paring knife to make criss-cross patterns on the tart and then brush it with the egg wash using a small pastry brush.
4. Place the pineapple tarts on a tray lined with parchment paper, arrange the pineapple tarts so they are at least 1 inch apart of each other.
5. Put the baking tray in a preheated oven of 160°C for 15 mins or till the bottom of the tarts had turned light brown.



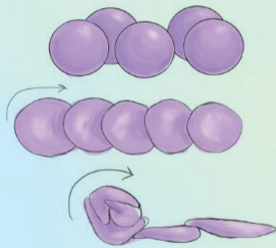
# Ube Steamed Buns

Mix in a bowl, 250g of purple sweet potatoes / ube, 150ml water, and 1/2 teaspoon of salt.



In a separate bowl, combine 250g bread flour, 1 1/2 teaspoon instant yeast, 2 tablespoons of powdered sugar, 3 1/2 castor sugar, and 1/2 teaspoon baking powder. Slowly add the wet ingredients and 1 tablespoon of shortening.

Knead the dough using a wooden paddle or your hands until it is smooth and doesn't stick to the bowl anymore.



To shape the bun into flowers, create small balls and flatten them before lining them up on top of each other and rolling them up and placing them on a steamer to cook for 10-15 minutes.





# CHICKEN WINGS

AN ATTEMPT BY 金如兰 蓝思追 欧阳子真 蓝景仪

START make sure you season with salt

★ SALT ★



★ 4-5 LBS CHICKEN WINGS + DRUMETTES ★



heat oil first — then deep fry

★ FRYING OIL ★



once a pale gold color place on wire rack or strainer



to remove excess oil



deep fry again for maximum crisp



ENJOY!!



RECIPE ADAPTED FROM JOSHUA WEISSMAN

ILLUSTRATED BY RINAMYEON



**Sunlight** streamed in through the kitchen window, illuminating the specks of dust dancing in the air. It was still early, the gentle sounds of bowls clinking together accompanied by footsteps across wooden floors.

"What are you making, A-Zhan?" Lan Zhan's shoulders stiffened when his brother peered around the kitchen door. His shirt was too big for him, slipping so far down his collar that Lan Zhan could see the red teeth marks that ringed purplish bruises. Wordlessly, Lan Zhan started the hot water.

Lan Huan padded into the kitchen, surveying Lan Zhan's spread of ingredients curiously. He reached around Lan Zhan to start the coffee machine, a device that had somehow migrated from Nie Mingjue's home into theirs. He was not complaining, for Wei Ying loved coffee, and could never function in the morning until he had at least two cups. Lan Zhan liked being able to provide that whenever he slept over.

"A-Zhan?" Lan Zhan sighed when Lan Huan finished spooning his tea leaves into his cup, moving to hook his chin over Lan Zhan's shoulder. He loved his brother, but making custard was such a fiddly business and he wanted to get it right. "Don't ignore me, A-Zhan."

"Mooncakes," Lan Zhan replied brusquely, gently untangling himself. "Wei Ying likes mooncakes."

"Ooh, mooncakes are tricky." Came Nie Mingjue's voice. He came striding into the kitchen, entirely shirtless. Lan Zhan looked up, just in time to see Lan Huan lean up for a kiss, Mingjue's arm wrapping around his waist. "Though I'm sure you'll get it just fine, A-Zhan."

The kettle whistled, and Lan Huan wandered over to steep his tea, sticking a finger into the mixture Lan Zhan was stirring.

"Gel!" Lan Zhan exclaimed, mildly horrified when his brother popped his finger into his mouth. "There's raw egg in there."

"Ooh, it's lumpy," Lan Huan said, sticking out his tongue. "A-Zhan, are you sure that's right?"

"A-Huan, leave him alone," Mingjue chastised. "He'll figure it out." He picked up his mug, the fragrance of coffee filling the room, and wound an arm around Lan Huan's waist. "Although if you need help, A-Zhan, you know who to call."

"Mn." Lan Zhan nodded. "Thank you."

Lan Huan's eyes glowed with warmth as he let his boyfriend drag him from the room, as they always did whenever Lan Zhan and Nie Mingjue made an effort to bond. For the longest time, it had just been Lan Zhan and Lan Huan against the world, and the appearance of Nie Mingjue had tipped Lan Zhan's world. Resistant to change as he was, it was difficult not to resent Nie Mingjue.

Lan Zhan turned back to his custard, frowning when he lifted it from the heat. His brother was right, he thought. The custard dough was too lumpy, and he was certain he saw bits of cooked egg in there. Sighing, he tossed out the entire batch just in time for Nie Mingjue to wander back in, whistling.

"You done with the stove, Lan Zhan?" Nie Mingjue asked. "Your brother's getting hangry. I thought I'd make some eggs or pancakes or something."

"Pancakes!" came Lan Huan's shout from the living room, and Nie Mingjue's lips tugged up into a fond smile.

"Pancakes it is," he said as Lan Zhan moved aside, setting his pot into the sink. "Just leave the dishes, A-Zhan. I'll wash them later. You want pancakes too?"

"Mn, always."

"A-Ying, are you sure you're alright?" Wei Ying looked up to see his sister hovering in the corner watching him. "You've re-wound that video at least six times now."

"Maybe he's trying to memorize it," Jin Zixuan grumbled, gently nudging past his wife to pick up the TV remote. Wei Ying grabbed his arm.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Peacock," he grouched, snatching the remote from Zixuan. "You made me miss the most important part!"

"What part?" Zixuan asked, bewildered. "Is that a mooncake video?"

"Mooncake bunnies," Wei Ying said, rewinding the video again.

"Why are you looking at a video about making mooncakes?" Zixuan asked, settling onto the sofa next to him. He looked up when Jiang Yanli approached, his face breaking into what could only be called a dreamy smile when she leaned down to kiss him. "Can you even bake?"

Wei Ying scowled, pausing in his frantic typing to land a kick on Jin Zixuan's expensive sweatpants clad leg.

"Snowskin mooncakes don't require baking, idiot," he muttered, shrinking back when Yanli shot him a disapproving look. She patted his thigh, setting a plate of fried rice that smelled absolutely divine onto the coffee table.

"Take a break and eat lunch," she said, pushing the plate over so that the smell wafted straight up into Wei Ying's nostrils. It made his mouth water, and Wei Ying backed away from his laptop, scooting over to take a big bite that made Jin Zixuan wrinkle his nose.

Even though Wei Ying did not *like* Jin Zixuan per say, he still tried to keep his rice grains to himself, scooting over to one end of the couch so that Zixuan could pick up his knitting and not get rice all over the fabric. Privately, he thought it was kind of sweet that Zixuan knew how to knit and intended to make Yanli a sweater for the winter, though he would never admit that in the pain of death.

"Why are you making mooncakes, A-Ying?" Jiang Yanli asked, settling back against the couch with her mending.

"Lan Zhan likes snowskin mooncakes," Wei Ying mumbled through a mouthful of rice. "And bunnies."

"So, you're making them to gift to Lan Zhan?" Jin Zixuan asked. "Why not just buy them for a store? Aren't you terrible in the kitchen?"

He ducked when Wei Ying smacked him with a cushion, scuttling out of the way when Jiang Yanli shot him a sharp look.

"I think it's very sweet," she said.

"Thank you, A-Jie," Wei Ying said, with a triumphant look directed at Zixuan.

"You don't even need to impress him," Jin Zixuan muttered under his breath. "He's so fucking whipped for you."

Wei Ying's cheeks went red, and he dropped his head, shoveling another mouthful of fried rice into his mouth.

"No, he's not," he mumbled, "and who said I was trying to impress him? Can't I just want to give him a handmade gift?"

"Of course, you can, A-Ying. Let me know if you need any help," Jiang Yanli said, reaching over to pet his hair gently. "I haven't made snowskin mooncakes before, though they must be easier than traditional mooncakes."

"Thank you, A-Jie." Wei Ying was definitely going to take her up on her offer, for he could barely cook anything that was not ramen in a packet.

Making mooncakes was too far out of his comfort zone.

"Da ge?"



Lan Zhan poked his head out of the kitchen to see Lan Huan lying across the sofa with his head in Nie Mingjue's lap. He appeared to be napping, while Nie Mingjue was watching some sort of nature show on the TV. It seemed more likely that Lan Huan had been the one to request it, but ended up falling asleep instead. For his part, Nie Mingjue seemed absolutely fascinated by what looked like the mating rituals of a pair of blue jays. He looked up though, at the sound of his name.

"Did you need something, A-Zhan?" he asked, stroking a hand through Lan Huan's hair. Lan Huan did not stir, his breathing even.

"I was wondering if you could help me with my custard," Lan Zhan said, his eyes fixed on his sleeping brother. "But if you're busy—"

"Oh, nah, I'll come. Just give me a sec." Nie Mingjue bent, gently kissing over Lan Huan's eyelids. Lan Huan grumbled, one hand fisting in Nie Mingjue's shirt.

"Where you going?" he slurred as Nie Mingjue lifted him, tucking a cushion under his head.

"Gonna help A-Zhan with his custard," Nie Mingjue said tenderly, tucking a stray strand of hair behind Lan Huan's ear. "You sleep, okay?"

"Umph," Lan Huan grumbled, turning over.

Nie Mingjue chuckled, shaking his head as he followed Lan Zhan into the kitchen.

"He's going to get a backache later," he said fondly, "sleeping on that thing."

"Mn," Lan Zhan agreed, showing Nie Mingjue his work bench.

"So, what are you having trouble with?" Nie Mingjue asked, surveying the two bowls of custard that Lan Zhan had already tried making.

"Lumps," Lan Zhan said grimly, pointing to the bowls.

"Ah." Nie Mingjue stuck a finger into the nearest bowl and wrinkled his nose. "I can still taste the flour in this one."

"Didn't use flour," Lan Zhan said, blinking as Nie Mingjue tilted the bowl, peering into it as if it contained the secrets of the universe. "Wheat starch."

"Did you sift it?" Mingjue asked. "That shit's lumpy as hell. If you don't sift it, that's probably one reason why you got lumps."

"Oh." Lan Zhan leaned over and scribbled that as a note into his notebook. "Thank you."

"Let's make a new batch and see how it turns out, okay?" Nie Mingjue said, gathering up the ingredients. "Let me see that video again?"

He glanced over to the iPad that Lan Zhan had set up on the far end of the counter, already dusted with some sort of flour and Lan Zhan dutifully started the video, rewinding it back to the beginning. He watched as Nie Mingjue sifted all the dry ingredients into the bowl with an ease that he envied, stirring with the whisk until everything was smooth before cracking in the eggs.

"You won't use this one, will you?" Mingjue asked with a smile. "Knowing you, you're gonna make a whole new batch for your boy."

Lan Zhan's ears coloured, and he dipped his head, studiously perching himself on a chair and taking notes as Mingjue stirred in the eggs. He poured the entire mixture through the strainer before allowing it into the pan.

"You wanna cook it on low," Mingjue said as he turned on the stove.

"Or the eggs will scramble, and you'll get lumps that way."

Lan Zhan nodded seriously, making another note down in his book.

He had made the mistake of turning the heat up too high for one of his batches and now that he knew, it was not something he was going to repeat. Lan Huan wandered into the kitchen at that moment, looking a little groggy from his nap. He wrapped himself around Nie Mingjue like an octopus, much to Lan Zhan's amusement.

"Still sleepy, babe?" Nie Mingjue asked, his dimples flashing as he stirred the custard on the stove.

"Mn. Watcha making?" Lan Huan asked, leaning his head against Mingjue's broad back.

"Showing Lan Zhan how to make the filling for his snow skin," Mingjue said. "You gotta keep stirring, or it'll clump too quickly and make more lumps."

There were so many ways for lumps to form, Lan Zhan mused as he made another note in his notebook.



"Ow, ow, ow!" Wei Ying yelped, hurriedly turning down the flame. His milk had scorched before he could even attempt to stir the mixture, and when he had tried to pull the entire mess out of the pan, he managed to burn himself on the edge of the pan instead. "How the fuck do they make it look so easy?"

"Da jiu said a bad word!" A little voice piped up behind him and Wei Ying spun around, bending to catch little Jin Ling before he could barrel right into his legs like he liked to do. He tossed him up into the air, wincing a little when his back twinged. He was getting too old for this. Or maybe Lan Zhan was right, and he should get a little more exercise.

"Little brat! Ow, you're heavy," Wei Ying said, catching Jin Ling in his arms. His nephew giggled as Jiang Yanli rounded the corner, smiling when she saw the two of them.

"Da jiu said a bad word," Jin Ling reported when Yanli reached for him, and Wei Ying let out a scandalized gasp.

"Traitor!"

"Are you making your mooncakes, A-Ying?" Yanli asked, pointedly choosing to ignore both their statements. "How are they turning out?"

"Badly," Wei Ying said, poking Jin Ling's cheek. "Burnt my hand on the pan too."

Yanli gasped, catching Wei Ying's hand. She blew gently on his burnt fingers and sighed.

"You need to be more careful, A-Ying."

"Mm, yes, A-Jie," Wei Ying said dutifully, padding along behind her like a puppy as she peered over the counter to inspect his failed custard. She poked at it with a finger, clutching onto Jin Ling who looked like he might wriggle out of her arms and onto the stove just for the fun of it.

"You should keep the heat on low," she said eventually, pulling away. "It'll help the milk not scorch."

Wei Ying nodded, leaving white flour prints on the screen of his phone as he took notes. Yanli looked thoughtful when he looked up, her face buried into Jin Ling's hair. The little monster had settled against her chest, his head pillowed on her shoulder, and it looked as if he might fall asleep any moment.

"I'm not very experienced with snowskin," Yanli said as she looked over the ingredients. "But you know who is?"

Wei Ying raised his eyebrows as he watched her smooth a hand through her son's hair.

"A-Cheng."

Wei Ying flinched and looked away.

They have not talked about it: the reason he was staying at Yanli's home and mooching off her husband's money.



Jiang Cheng and he have not spoken to each other for nearly two weeks after their falling out and at this point, Wei Ying could barely remember the reason that they had fought in the first place.

"He makes beautiful mooncakes for the children's home every year," Yanli said as if she could not see the trepidation rising in Wei Ying's eyes. "He'd be able to help."

She looked at Wei Ying, who was trying his best to pretend he had not heard a thing.

"A-Ying, I think it's time you talked to him."

"He doesn't want to talk to me," Wei Ying grumbled.

"Have you tried calling him?"

"No, A-Jie. He'll just yell at me again and I *don't* want to deal with that."

"He asked about you," Yanli said. "We met him for dinner the other day when you didn't want to come."

Wei Ying rolled his eyes and leaned against the counter. He wished he could say he did not care, but in truth, he was tired of seeing the peacock every day. As much as he loved Yanli, there was only just so much lovey dovey stuff he could stomach watching. He missed his apartment with Jiang Cheng, and their very comfortable couch where they spent many evenings playing video games. Hell, he even missed Jiang Cheng a little bit. His brother might be an anal-retentive idiot with zero emotional capacity, but he made the best fried rice that Wei Ying had ever had.

"Talk to him, A-Ying," Yanli said firmly. "You know you're welcome here anytime, but I'm no good at snowskin mooncakes and you don't want to give anything less than perfect to your Lan Zhan."



Lan Zhan pushed open the door to the bakery, hiding a smile when he heard giggling over the soft music. Huaisang waved him through from the counter, shaking his head.

"I wouldn't go in there," he said. "They've been at it for the whole morning. I don't know if any baking has gotten done."

Lan Zhan nodded in acknowledgment, peeking into the spacious kitchen. He bit down hard on his lower lip when he spied his brother backed up against a counter, bracketed by Nie Mingjue's arms. They were both absolutely covered in flour, white dust coating Nie Mingjue's green shirt and olive coloured apron, along his arms and in his hair.

Lan Huan had flour in his hair too, a smear of white along his cheekbones and all the way up his elbows as if he had dipped his arms into a bowl of it.

"You started it," Lan Zhan heard him say, a laugh bubbling out from between his lips and Mingjue's expression flickered between exasperated and painfully fond.

"You're an asshole," Mingjue said without any bite. He leaned down and Lan Zhan averted his eyes quickly, darting back to the counter with his ears burning.

"Told you," Huaisang said sympathetically. "They'd stop if you went in though. Da Ge's too shameless in front of me."

"Hmm." Lan Zhan glanced at the door and steeled himself. Thankfully, when he peered in again, the two had separated themselves and were back at the worktables.

They looked very sweet, with Mingjue's arms wrapped around Lan Huan's body, his hands covering Lan Huan's as he guided him into kneading dough. Every so often, he would kiss the back of Lan Huan's head, or his shoulder, where Lan Huan's shirt was slipping down to expose bare skin.

Lan Zhan almost felt bad interrupting when he rapped on the door and they both looked up.

"Oh, A-Zhan!" Lan Huan exclaimed, blushing a soft pink. He tugged his shirt collar higher, even as Mingjue bent to kiss him one more time. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long," Lan Zhan said. "Da ge said I could use his kitchen to make my mooncakes."

"Mhm," Mingjue hummed, kissing the side of Lan Huan's head. "You needed help with the assembly too, didn't you, A-Zhan?"

"Yes," Lan Zhan said patiently. He was good at a great many things, but modeling and clay were not his forte. They were Lan Huan's, though, and surprisingly, Nie Mingjue's, who had very clever fingers.

"Let me just finish up this bread dough and I'll clear the counter for you. You can start on the stove first though if you want. My heart, you should go take a shower. You've got flour in your hair."

"Come with me?"

Lan Huan pouted when Mingjue nudged him aside, giving the bread dough on the table a few rough kneads before slicing off a piece. He wiggled the dough skillfully until it was so thin light could pass through it and nodded approvingly.

Lan Zhan watched as he bundled up the dough with a gentleness he only ever displayed with Lan Huan and his cat, Baxia, and set it into a basket.

"My heart, we actually have to come back down to help A-Zhan," Mingjue said, tweaking Lan Huan's nose when he was done. "Take anything you want from my closet. I think some of your old sweatpants are in there too."

Lan Huan pouted harder, earning himself another tweak and a kiss before Mingjue started scraping the flour and dough from the worktable.

Lan Zhan smiled to himself. Once, he would envy his brother for the easy affection that he shared with his boyfriend, but now that he had Wei Ying, it was a lot easier to appreciate just how much Nie Mingjue indulged his brother, who had, for the most of his life, been the one to take care of Lan Zhan and everyone else.

"Thinking of Wei Ying?" Mingjue teased as he tossed his handful of flour bits and dough into the trash can. "You only smile like that when you think of him, you know?"

"Mn," Lan Zhan answered, his ears burning at being caught. He set his bag down on the counters near the stove and started to unpack.

"I'm gonna head up to shower. Your brother's probably done by now," Mingjue said. "I'll be down in a bit, alright? If Huaisang comes in to bother you, ask him to get out. He's not supposed to be working today."

"Mn." Lan Zhan nodded, focused on his ingredients. He was nearly done by the time Lan Huan came ambling back into the kitchen, dressed in a shirt that was definitely not his. He peered over Lan Zhan's shoulder, sipping on a juice box he must have taken from the Nie's apartment. When Mingjue came into the kitchen with his hair damp and coiled up into a man bun, Lan Huan laughed and reached up to tug at the loose strands.

"How's the custard coming along, A-Zhan?" Mingjue asked, nimbly evading Lan Huan's itchy fingers. He caught Lan Huan's wrist, planting a kiss on his knuckles absently.

"Good." Lan Zhan gave it one last stir and took it off the heat.

He tugged gloves over his hands as Mingjue moved over to the sink, Lan Huan tossing his juice box to follow him.



They both washed their hands thoroughly with soap and water, drying them before putting on the gloves.

"The bunnies are so cute," Lan Huan said as he watched Lan Zhan portion out the skin and filling respectively. "What did you use for the black colour, A-Zhan?"

"Cocoa powder and charcoal," Lan Zhan said. He was very proud of the colour, for Mingjue had told him it would be tricky to get a solid black. He had pulverised freeze-dried strawberries for the red filling, and the dough was a very pretty pink.

His brother's bunnies looked the best when they were done, perfect little round cakes on the tray, and Lan Zhan thought that Wei Ying would certainly like them very much. He *hoped* that Wei Ying liked them. He would make another batch later to do on his own.

"We have an excess of snow skin mooncakes now," Lan Huan said with a laugh. "A-Zhan ah, we're going to have to start giving these to people."

"Mn. Huaisang and Da ge can eat them," Lan Zhan said, surveying the rows of little black bunnies with pride. "I will make a new batch just for Wei Ying."

Mingjue shook his head with a smile, rinsing off his hands.

"You work so hard for that boy, A-Zhan. How many times have you done this recipe now?"

"Must be perfect for Wei Ying," Lan Zhan said, reaching out to take one of his brother's perfect bunnies off the tray. He popped it into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

"They're pretty good," Mingjue said after he had sampled one. "But I'm a traditionalist. I like my lotus paste traditional mooncakes."

"Why don't you show A-Zhan how to make them?" Lan Huan asked. "You make them every year for Zhong Qiu Jie, don't you?"

"Yeah, I have the moulds around here somewhere. And I think we still have lotus paste in the pantry," Mingjue said. "Do you want to learn, A-Zhan?"

Lan Zhan nodded. He might not make any more mooncakes after this, but it would be educational, and Lan Zhan was never one to turn down a chance to learn. He might even make some for his brother if he got in the mood.

"Alright. Let me go get the stuff. You can leave whatever you don't want to eat in the freezer. I'll demolish them with Huaisang tonight."



Wei Ying glared at the phone, chewing his lip. He desperately needed help for his mooncakes, and his date with Lan Zhan was coming up all too soon. But it did not mean he had to give in! He was a strong, capable man who could—

The phone buzzed loudly, and Wei Ying nearly jumped out of his skin. He pressed the answer button before he saw the contact's name clearly and cursed.

"A-Jie said you needed my help with something. The hell do you want?" Jiang Cheng's voice rang out from the other end, and without even having to see his face, Wei Ying already knew that he was glowering.

"I don't need anything," Wei Ying bit out, refusing to give in so soon.

"Bullshit," Jiang Cheng scoffed. "You've been mooching off A-Jie. You need a damn job, that's what you need."

"I'm hanging up," Wei Ying snapped. He did not need Jiang Cheng heckling him again. The reason for their fight resurfaced in his mind, and he bit back a sharper retort. "If you called just to get on my case about that, you can fuck off."

Jiang Cheng snorted, and Wei Ying was filled with the irrational urge to fling his phone across the room and watch it break. But Jiang Cheng was right in that he had recently lost his job and needed to save money. Hence the making of gifts when he would usually just buy one for Lan Zhan.

"You need help with mooncakes, right? For your dumb boyfriend?" Jiang Cheng snapped. "Just get your ass home and I'll teach you. And next time, ask me *yourself*!"

The line clicked and Wei Ying stared at the phone in a mix of bewilderment and anger. He certainly had not asked Yanli to ask for him. But she clearly had an agenda and Wei Ying *really* did need help with his mooncakes. And Lan Zhan was not *dumb*.

Muttering to himself, Wei Ying dragged himself off the couch.

Jiang Cheng was already in the kitchen when he entered the apartment, pottering around. Wei Ying smelled something wonderful cooking and his stomach grumbled. He should have eaten something at A-Jie's place before coming back. Jiang Cheng was likely still annoyed at him and probably not going to feed him—

"Oh look, the asshole's back," Jiang Cheng said when he walked out of the kitchen with a plate full of fiery red noodles. He set it down hard on the dining table and pointed at it. "Eat."

Wei Ying squared his shoulders, forcing himself to look away from the noodles. They smelled amazing, like garlic and chilli oil.

"I'm not hungry," he muttered, even when his stomach grumbled again. *Traitor*.

"Liar," Jiang Cheng snorted, spinning on his heel. "That better be gone by the time I come back out or you can figure out the mooncakes yourself."

Sticking out his tongue at Jiang Cheng's back, Wei Ying dropped into the chair and started eating. The noodles were *delicious*, cooked exactly the way he liked it, and it made warmth pool in his chest, even though he was still mad at Jiang Cheng.

He finished the plate in record time, leaving nothing but streaks of red oil. When he brought it into the kitchen, Jiang Cheng was visibly pleased, as he always was when someone enjoyed his cooking.

Wei Ying rinsed the plate, trying not to look too interested in all the bowls Jiang Cheng had on the counter. He did not even have the video playing as he mixed powders confidently in a bowl.

"You're not even looking at the recipe," he said, setting the plate and utensils on the drying rack.

"I don't need one," Jiang Cheng said. "I make these every couple of months."

"What for? Shijie said you make them for the children's home," Wei Ying asked, utterly baffled.

"Two children's homes actually. And sometimes if a child doesn't have someone to contribute for a bake sale. And then again for Zhong Qiu Jie. Where do you think our mooncakes come from?" Jiang Cheng said with a sniff.

"I thought Shijie made them all," Wei Ying said, sulky. He padded over, peering over Jiang Cheng's shoulder as he poured the mixture into the saucepan.

"She makes the traditional ones," Jiang Cheng said airily. The dough formed beautifully on the pan, with no scorching or burning and Wei Ying had to admit that he was impressed. Jiang Cheng tipped the dough out onto the counter, covering it with plastic wrap. "Here put this in the fridge. I'll start a new batch so you can watch."



He measured out the different dry ingredients with precision, gesturing for Wei Ying to come closer.

"You can't mess up pouring milk, can you?" Jiang Cheng asked, pointing at the milk carton. Wei Ying rolled his eyes, setting the measuring cup on the scale. It was the most careful pour he had ever done. Jiang Cheng scoffed at him when he presented it with some sarcasm.

Jiang Cheng moved around the stove with such familiarity that Wei Ying was almost surprised. He had no idea that his brother was so adept at making what he thought were very fiddly desserts. But then maybe Wei Ying did not know his brother very well at all.

"A-Jie said your milk scorched," Jiang Cheng said thoughtfully as he lifted the lid of the steamer. "You probably got lumps too."

"How would you know?" Wei Ying grumbled.

Jiang Cheng glowered, pulling the skin out of the steamer. He tipped it into a clean plate and started kneading.

"Do you want my help or no? You're gonna make the next batch yourself, since you were watching me so closely."

"We're going to have so many mooncakes," Wei Ying muttered under his breath as he pulled the recipe up on his phone. Jiang Cheng shouted amounts at him as he measured and it was strangely cathartic, having his brother back to speaking to him, even if it was about mooncakes.

"Why'd you wanna make mooncakes anyway," Jiang Cheng grumbled as he watched Wei Ying stir the mooncake skin mixture through a sieve. "Zhong Qiu Jie is already over."

"Lan Zhan likes mooncakes any time of year," Wei Ying said. "Do you know how I can tint this blue by the way? White is boring."

Jiang Cheng blinked, and to Wei Ying's surprise, went to the cupboards to begin digging. He tried not to be distracted as he set the mooncake skin into the steamer and started on the custard, trying to remember exactly how Jiang Cheng had done it. His workspace grew messier and messier, with flour dusted over the counter, a stray eggshell piece stuck to the corner of the stove.

Jiang Cheng emerged from his search with a blue bottle to see Wei Ying stirring the custard over the fire. He hurried over, turning the flame down.

"Not so high. It'll scorch before it thickens," he said, his tone surprisingly patient. Wei Ying blinked, startled. Jiang Cheng set the bottle on the counter and lifted the steamer's lid to check on the snowskin. He hummed approvingly, before turning his attention back onto Wei Ying's custard.

Wei Ying's arm was already sore and tired by the time he saw the mixture begin to clump. He started to slow but Jiang Cheng nudged him so hard he jumped, returning to stirring at once.

"You need to keep stirring," Jiang Cheng said. "Or it won't heat evenly."

"Since when did you learn to make snowskin?" Wei Ying asked. "And why don't I know this?"

"Do you pay attention to anything but yourself?" Jiang Cheng grouched back and *ouch*, that stung. Wei Ying swallowed down his retort when Jiang Cheng continued. "Also, A-Niang taught me. A-Die showed A-Jie how to make traditional mooncakes. He even sent her to the Nies to learn it properly. She tried to teach me, but I could never get them right, so I switched to snowskin."

"Madam Yu knows how to make mooncakes?" Wei Ying's eyes bugged out of his head. Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, bumping him with his hip.

"Hurry up. It's almost done."

The snowskin was the most perfect batch Wei Ying had ever made, soft and pliable as he kneaded them with gloved hands.

"You can use spirulina powder for the colour," Jiang Cheng dripped some water into the blue dust and handed it over.

Wei Ying kneaded the colouring into the white dough, delighting when the dough turned gradually into a gentle blue hue. On his other side, Jiang Cheng helped him roll the custard filling into little balls.

"There, be gentle," Jiang Cheng said as he showed Wei Ying how to wrap the snowskin around the custard ball, how to tuck the ends in and roll it so that it was even all the way around. "I'll do the eyes for you since you definitely drink too much coffee to be steady enough."

Just to spite him, Wei Ying tried to put some of the sesame seeds on himself. They were a little strange looking, definitely wonky, but they were finally edible. Jiang Cheng plated them up and they plopped onto the couch to eat them.

"They're not bad, for your what? Fifth try?" he said as he bit down on the rabbit's head. Wei Ying rolled his eyes, munching down on a bunny's butt.

"Cut me some slack, I'm shit at cooking."

"I'm cutting you a lot of slack," Jiang Cheng scoffed. "I've been paying the damn rent on this apartment for two months!"

Wei Ying closed his eyes. Here it comes.

"Seriously, Wei Wuxian, can you stop running from your problems? I spoke to the Nies and they said they could use another cashier because Huaisang's going back to uni."

"You asked Huaisang for a job?" Wei Ying scowled.

"It's not like you were gonna do it yourself," Jiang Cheng said, shrugging. "I sent them your resume and everything. So fucking call them or get a better job!"

Wei Ying blinked when Jiang Cheng tossed a post it pad at his head and got up, heading into the kitchen with his plate. He felt like a massive asshole as he stared at his brother's re-treating back.

"Hey, Jiang Cheng?" he said, following behind. "I'm sorry."

"You could say thank you once in a while, you know?" Jiang Cheng grumbled when Wei Ying joined him at the sink. He rinsed off his plate, setting on the drying rack before turning around to face him.

"I know," Wei Ying said, ducking his head. "I just--"

"Don't like people to see you in trouble?" Jiang Cheng raised his eyebrows. "I grew up with you, Wei Wuxian. Just tell me next time you get yourself into shit, okay? I'll bail you out, just like when we were kids. Nothing has changed. And nothing will."

Wei Ying grimaced.

"Since when were you the sweet talker of the family?" he said. "So mushy, Jiang Cheng!"

Jiang Cheng's face went red, and he lunged at Wei Ying, who darted away with a laugh.

"Who's sweet talking you? Come back here, you jackass!"



The snow fell so softly that Lan Zhan did not notice it at first. He stood by the streetlight; face bathed in its orange glow as he waited. His breath exhaled in a puff of mist, and he reached up to tug the scarf that Lan Huan had wound around his neck higher to cover his mouth. It was a lovely blue scarf, one that Wei Ying had gifted him in the fall when the weather grew chillier.

His mooncakes sat in a lovely black gift box, tied up with a red ribbon, each one of them a perfect little bunny.



Lan Zhan hoped Wei Ying would like them; hoped he could see how much work he put into making them perfect. He had enjoyed the process; it was much simpler compared to traditional mooncakes, as Nie Mingjue had shown him, and his brother was absolutely delighted by the amount of time they spent together in the kitchen.

Now his heart was pounding away in his chest, a drumbeat of hope and trepidation as he waited for Wei Ying at the bus stop. He would have liked to have Wei Ying over, but he had taken up enough of Nie Mingjue's time that he thought he ought not to eat into their date nights. Wei Ying had not mentioned anything about his home and Lan Zhan was still a little too shy to ask, thus their meeting at a mutual bus stop.

It was not so bad a meeting place, Lan Zhan thought as he watched the snow fall, snowflakes dusting over his cheeks. The sound of boots thudding on tarmac made him turn, just in time to see Wei Ying huffing and puffing up the hill. His black beanie was askew, a few tufts of dark hair hanging in his eyes. Lan Zhan's heart skipped a beat as he came closer, the streetlights illuminating his face, gently flushed from the cold. Wei Ying's scarf hung loosely off his neck, and his coat was open, exposing his thin T-shirt to the wind.

"Sorry, Lan Zhan! Jiang Cheng made me eat something before I left, that little bastard. He *knew* I was running late."

Lan Zhan tutted softly, grabbing the ends of Wei Ying's scarf once he was within reach. He tugged and Wei Ying stumbled, one arm slinging around his waist to steady himself.

"Wei Ying should wear his scarf properly," Lan Zhan murmured. "It is cold tonight."

"Aiyo Lan Zhan, so thoughtful!" The flush on Wei Ying's face deepened and Lan Zhan leaned forward to kiss him, threading his fingers into Wei Ying's ruffled hair.

Wei Ying smelled like cherry blossoms, and a hint of sandalwood that made Lan Zhan shiver with pleasure. He liked the thought of Wei Ying smelling like him. His lips tasted like red wine, like he had been drinking.

"Are you cold, Lan Zhan? Have you been waiting long?" Wei Ying asked when they pulled apart, breathless once more.

"Not long," Lan Zhan said, tangling his fingers with Wei Ying's. He frowned at the chill, and resolutely stuck Wei Ying's cold hand into his pocket. "I brought you something."

"Ah?" Wei Ying's mouth fell open, lovely and pink and Lan Zhan wanted to kiss him again. He restrained himself however, holding up the bag containing the bunny mooncakes. "Aiyo, Lan Zhan. I had something for you too, but I left them in the apartment. Let's go there if you don't mind? I can totally run back to fetch them if you don't want-."

"Don't mind," Lan Zhan murmured, smiling after he pulled away. Wei Ying looked like he had the breath kissed right out of him, and it was a very good look, his lips kiss swollen, his cheeks softly blushed from the cold. Lan Zhan carefully closed Wei Ying's coat for him, before taking the hand that had slipped out of his pocket and sliding it back in.

"Lan Zhan, that's not fair," Wei Ying bumbled weakly. "You can't kiss me in the middle of a sentence. My brain goes all haywire when you do that, and I forget what I was saying."

"Mn." Lan Zhan smiled, practically radiating self satisfaction. "Was going to go to Wei Ying's apartment."

"Right," Wei Ying said, still a little dazed, but he led the way forward.

Wei Ying's apartment was small and warm when he opened the door, toeing off his shoes. Lan Zhan looked around him in wonder as he shrugged off his coat, hanging it on the coat rack.

"Excuse the mess, Lan Zhan," Wei Ying said, hurrying to clear a space on the coffee table. "Jiang Cheng's gone out for the night, so we have the place to ourselves."

He wiggled his eyebrows and Lan Zhan blushed, padding warily over to sit on the couch.

"Oh yes, your gift!" Wei Ying bounced up before Lan Zhan had even sat down, dashing around the corner to where Lan Zhan assumed was the kitchen. "I spent a lot of time on this, Lan Zhan, so I hope you like it."

"Mn," Lan Zhan said. "Will like it."

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Ying laughed, the sound music to Lan Zhan's ears. "You don't even know what it is yet!"

"Wei Ying made it. I will like it," Lan Zhan said firmly. He set his own bag on the table, gesturing for Wei Ying to take it. "Wei Ying should open."

"We should do it together!" Wei Ying enthused, taking the gift box out of the bag. "Ah, Lan Zhan, you've wrapped it so prettily I don't wanna ruin it!"

Lan Zhan carefully unwrapped the box Wei Ying had handed to him, his heart thumping wildly when he lifted the lid. He could not hide a smile when he saw the little blue bunnies sitting in the box.

"Aiya Lan Zhan! We gave each other the same thing!" Wei Ying exclaimed. "I guess great minds think alike huh?"

He pulled one of the little black bunnies out of his box, turning it round and round to examine it with sheer delight. Lan Zhan smiled, picking up a wonky little blue bunny. It was a little misshapen but still so cute it was rather a shame to eat it.

"Yours are so pretty, Lan Zhan," Wei Ying said. "How'd you get the colour?"

"Cocoa powder and charcoal," Lan Zhan said. "Wei Ying's?"

"Spirulina powder," Wei Ying said. "Jiang Cheng gave me the idea. Actually, he helped me with them. I'm not very good in the kitchen."

"Mn. I asked Da ge for help," Lan Zhan admitted.

"That must have made Xichen ge so happy," Wei Ying laughed. "He's always trying to get you to spend more time with other people."

Lan Zhan took a tiny nibble of his mooncake and gave a small sigh when the skin practically melted in his mouth, revealing the sweet custard centre. He held it up, nodding with approval.

"This is good."

"Yeah? Yours taste amazing too!" Wei Ying cheered, giving him a thumbs up. He flopped down onto the couch next to Lan Zhan, sidling up next to him. Lan Zhan's ears burned when he felt the line of Wei Ying's thigh press up against his own, and he shuddered.

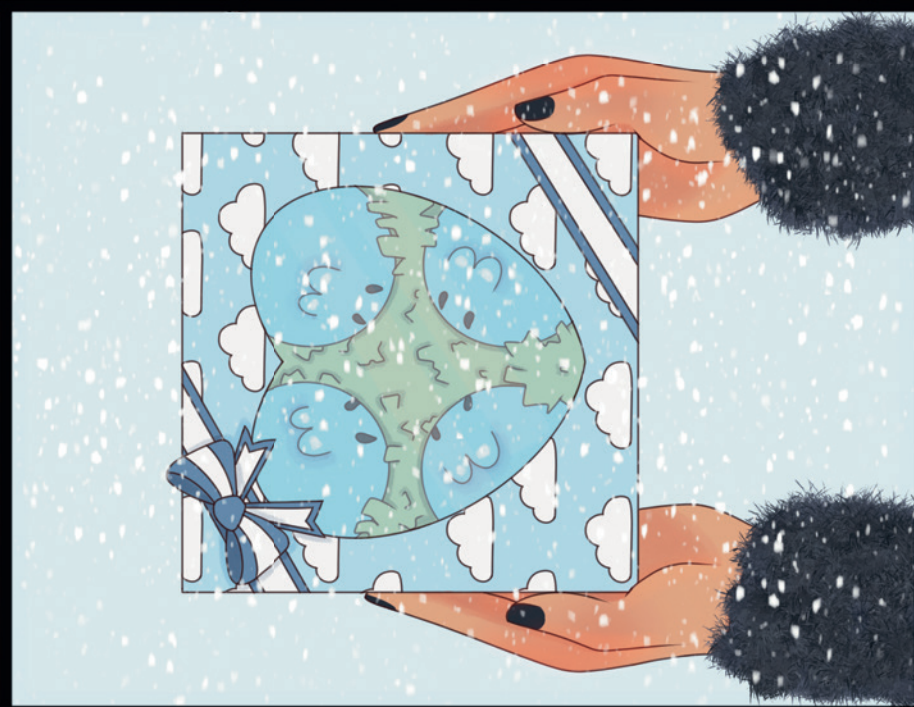
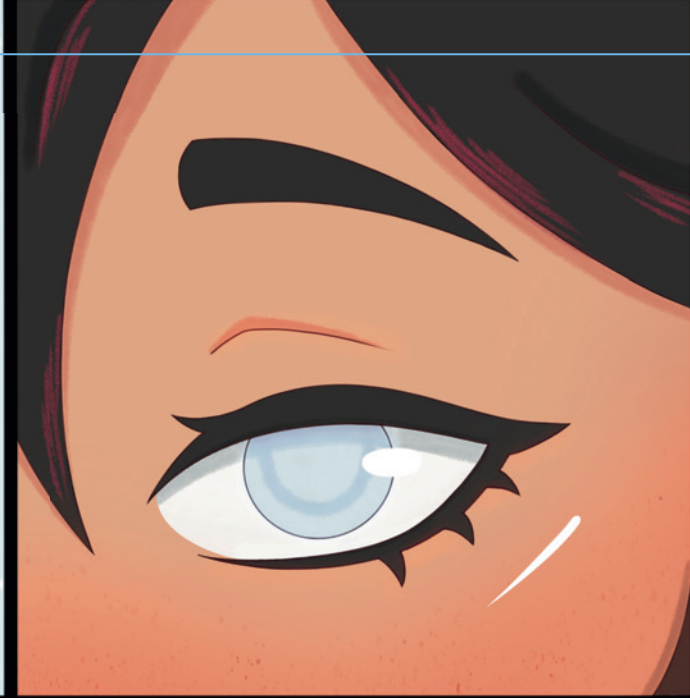
"Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, aren't you gonna kiss me?" Wei Ying teased. "I made mooncakes for you."

Instead of answering, Lan Zhan reached over, fisting a hand into the collar of Wei Ying's shirt. He kissed the next words out of Wei Ying's mouth, and Wei Ying went boneless against him, fingers curving around Lan Zhan's face.

"Thank you, Wei Ying," he breathed, and Wei Ying giggled.

"Always so sincere, my Lan Zhan," he teased. "Thank you for my bunnies too!"







# Mooncake

For 12 Mooncakes 🌸 🌸 🌸 by VOlympianlove

## Ingredients:

### Custard Filling:

45 g Milk Powder  
25 g Wheat starch  
100 g Milk  
2 Eggs  
45 g Caster sugar  
40 g Unsalted butter  
Matcha powder, Cocoa Powder

### Snowskin

33 g Glutinous rice flour  
33 g Rice flour  
20 g Wheat starch  
20 g Caster sugar  
150 g Milk  
13 g Condensed milk  
20 g Oil  
2-3 Tbsp Fried Glutinous Rice Flour

### Assembly (optional if you just want mooncake balls)

Beetroot or any other colourant for the ears.  
WWX uses spirulina and water to make blue.  
LWJ uses charcoal for his.  
Sesame seeds

## Steps:

### Custard

1. Combine milk powder, wheat starch and milk in a bowl and stir until smooth.
2. Add the eggs and the caster sugar and whisk until smooth.
3. Pour the mixture into a pan through a sieve for a smoother texture.
4. Add in butter.
5. Cook over low heat until the mixture starts to clump at the bottom of the pan. Stir constantly until mixture forms a smooth, not clumpy dough. When it does not stick to the spatula and pan, remove from heat.
6. Divide into 3 portions.
7. Add matcha powder to one portion, cocoa powder to the other, mix well and wrap them up separately in plastic wrap. Wrap the last portion in plastic wrap.
8. Chill in the fridge until ready for use.

### Snowskin

9. Combine all the ingredients in a bowl and stir until no lumps remain.
10. Pass mixture through a sieve into a heat-proof bowl.
11. Steam on medium low heat for 25 mins, covered so that no water drips into the bowl.
12. While waiting, fry up some glutinous rice flour for 5 mins and set aside for dusting.
13. When the snowskin is done, remove from steamer and cut with spatula while still hot. Knead with spatula before transferring into a bigger bowl.
14. Keep kneading with spatula until you get a finer texture.
15. Put on plastic gloves (the snowskin is still VERY hot so gloves are CRUCIAL) and knead until smooth and elastic.
16. Measure out 12g for pink dough.
17. Cover the rest and let cool completely.
18. Grate some beetroot and strain the juice for natural red food colouring.
19. Knead into the 12g of dough to make pink and wrap in plastic wrap.

### Assembly:

20. Divide the filling into 25g pieces. You should have 12.
21. Shape into balls.
22. Take 20g of white dough and 1g of pink and roll both into smooth balls.
23. Wearing gloves, flatten the white dough into a disk and thin out the center with a finger.
24. Flatten the pink dough and press it down into the center of the white circle.
25. Place filling in the middle and gently push the wrapper down around the ball.
26. Turning the ball over, push the wrapper up gently to seal completely.
27. Roll into a smooth ball and then in the fried glutinous rice flour until covered.
28. Using the tip of some chopsticks, gently push upwards where you can see the pink peeking through to create the bunny's ears!
29. Add 2 sesame seeds for the eyes and a tiny white ball of dough on the back, sticking the dough ball on with water to create the tail and you're done!

# Wen Ruohan's leftovers

## Noodles with spicy sauce

based on the Mapo Tofu recipe from  
[www.chinasichuanfood.com/mapo-tofu-recipe](http://www.chinasichuanfood.com/mapo-tofu-recipe)

### Ingredients

for 2 servings\*

200 g ground pork  
200 g shrimp      finely chopped  
Sesame oil  
3 tbsp neutral oil for frying  
2-3 ~~6~~ tbsp doubanjiang      spicy bean paste

1-2 cloves

~~The correct amount~~ of garlic  
1 tsp ginger  
1 tbsp douchi fermented soybeans  
2-3 scallions  
1 tsp ground Sichuan pepper  
1 tbsp chili garlic oil

100

250 ml shaoxing wine  
Light soy sauce  
Dark soy sauce  
1 tsp Corn starch  
200g noodles of your choice  
~~I loyal subordinate who will definitely not betray you~~

\*All quantities are rough estimates

Put a pot with salted water for the noodles on the stove.

Chop doubanjiang, garlic, ginger, douchi and light parts of the scallions finely. Cut the dark green part into rings, and set aside for garnish.

Mix ground pork and shrimp evenly with sesame oil in a bowl, fry in pan until crispy then remove from pan and put back into bowl.

Fry doubanjiang until fragrant, add ginger, garlic, douchi and white part of the scallions, fry until cooked.

Add chili-garlic oil, then wine. Put the meat back in the pan too. Add both types of soy sauce to taste. Add ~~more wine then~~ some water until you get the desired quantity of sauce.

Dilute corn starch in a glass of water and add half, wait a bit then add the rest, let the sauce come to a boil so it can thicken.

Meanwhile cook the noodles following package instructions.

Serve noodles in a bowl and top with sauce, Sichuan pepper and dark parts of the scallions.





# Baked to Finish

**Lan Wangji's new neighbors know exactly  
how to get to his heart...  
through his stomach.**

by by chococaraz

**Lan Wangji** adored his new apartment. He had moved out from the family compound and moved into a new city for his new job and had found a great apartment with several advantages, from its wide balcony, floor to ceiling windows and most importantly eateries and restaurants in walking distance.

This is very important point for him while apartment hunting, for he doesn't know how to cook.

It was embarrassing for a guy of his age and upbringing, cooking was the one thing he had failed abysmally, to the point his uncle had banned him from the kitchen after a memorable incident involving a burnt pot and black ceiling.

It was a major issue when he had voiced his intention to take a job far away from his uncle and brother but he believed with the modern commodities, it was not hard for him to find meals fitting of his taste.

Wangji frowned as he perused through the delivery menu of the yet another restaurant he was trying out. So far, he only found one restaurant that was able to deliver the meals palatable to his stomach but they were closed for the day. It was sad that people seem to define healthy, vegetarian meals as bland and boring.

Yet again he yearns for the *sujiaozi* and *chaofan* uncle used to make for him and his brother every weekend.

He was startled from his daydream when he heard the doorbell rang. Putting down his phone, he went to the door to see the most handsome man he ever seen (and as a photographer he had seen a lot) carrying a Tupperware with him standing in front of his door, his silvery-grey eyes seemed to sparkled to him.

"Hi," his warm and velvety voice tickled Wangji's ears and senses, "I'm Wei Wuxian, your next-door neighbor. A-Yuan and I made some food to share with you as a welcoming gift."

He then noticed that there was a kid peeping at him from behind the very handsome man. How did he not realize that?

Oh right, he was distracted by the very handsome specimen of a human in front of him.

"- pork baozis." Wangji finally registered what his neighbor was saying. Flustered to have caught himself checking out the man and ignoring what he said for the last few minutes, he blurted out the first though he could think of.

"I'm vegan."

Ah heck. Wangji can practically feel his ears burning as his neighbors blinked at him.

"Oh, okay, cool. Should have checked before we offered." Wuxian smiled warily at him before turning down to the kid. "Hear that, Yuan-er? That means more for us! Sorry again for this." His smile turned warmer. "Just knock at the door if you need anything okay?"

Wangji could only nod as he fled back into his apartment.

"Xian-gege, what does vegan mean?" Wangji can hear A-Yuan asked Wei Wuxian as the door swung close. "It means he can't eat meat at all, so not even eggs."

"Not even egg?" A-Yuan sounded horrified. "What does he eat then?"

"Vegetables and fruits, even the icky cabbages you don't like." Wei Wuxian teased.

Even the thick door couldn't completely masked A-Yuan's squeak of horror and Wei Wuxian's loud laugh.

Wangji had just left the elevator after the long day at work when he heard someone called his name. He looked up to see his neighbor was waiting by his door, looking handsome and very cosy in his faded red oversized sweater and black pants.

"Hello again." Wei Wuxian waved at him with his free hand, another juggling with the Tupperware he was holding. "So A-Yuan is in the middle of a quest right now, looking for delicious food to cook and thought that you might be a good test subject for his experiments."

Wangji blinked, looking dubiously at the container and back at him. The kid like he hasn't even turned five, Wei Wuxian wouldn't have let him hold the knife and actually cook, right?

Noticing Wangji skeptical look, Wuxian laughed. "Sorry, should have explained that better. I'm his sous chef, aka the one actually cooking in the kitchen while he bosses me around." Wei Wuxian laughed again, his eyes bright with mischief. "Anyways, feel free to throw them away if you don't want to, you're not obligated to try them." He grinned at him, and Wangji can feel his traitorous heart fluttering in delight.

"No!" He coughed as Wuxian quirked an eyebrow at him. "I mean, it is a shame to throw your hard work away and I should never waste food."

"You sure? They could be very awful you know? Especially since this is our first attempt. Well, don't say I didn't warn you later when you're too busy hurling your gut out." With another grin, he walked away, leaving Wangji to watch him leave.

Wei Wuxian *lied*.

It was the best cauliflower pasta he ever tasted. And he doesn't even like cauliflower!

After several bites later, Wangji looked down mournfully at the empty Tupperware. He wonders if it's shameless to beg some more from his neighbor.

It quickly became a routine. Wei Wuxian and A-Yuan would come knocking on his door every few days, armed with identical happy grins and Tupperware, each filled with delicious home-cook meals.

In return of the warm meals (and because Wangji is a shameless, shameless man addicted to Wei Wuxian bright smile), he would return the containers with pastries and chocolates he purchased from novelty shops he can find, enjoying the small talks every time he knocks on their door.

The situation was not good for his silently growing crush, especially when Wei Wuxian would gently teased him about his day, and doesn't seem to mind that he had nothing much to say, chattering away about himself.

Wangji quickly learnt that A. Wei Wuxian is a freelance web designer and troubleshoot working from home, B. A-Yuan was actually his child in everywhere but blood/his friends' nephew he dotes on and C. Is very, very single. (Thanks to A Yuan, who innocently revealed that fact to him, and given a stuffed rabbit as a gift.)

So yea, Lan Wangji was enjoying his life.

Until one day he caught an unknown man leaving his neighbor-slash-crush's apartment, hugging Wei Wuxian and kissing A-Yuan on the cheeks, waving merrily at them as the elevator door shuts close.

What is this feeling of devastation? Wangji thought he was the only man in Wei Wuxian's life!! Is this what betrayal and heartbreak feels like?

(He knew he was being a bit dramatic over this but this is his first crush so let him wallow in pain please)

"Lan Wangji!" Wuxian finally realized his presence, A-Yuan grinning merrily in his arms as both of them waved at him. "Just the man we were looking for. A-Ning helped us made some tofu stir-fry today and we made enough to give some for you."

Wangji was helpless against their bright smiles that he accepted the still warm Tupperware even though he wants to throw them into the dustbin.

*Who on earth is A-Ning?* Wangji grumbled as he slammed the door shut.



He cried.

The Tofu Stir-Fry with Broccolini and Mushrooms was delicious. He can't defeat this mysterious cook. Wei Wuxian would never date him now since there's a better man and cook in his life.

He spent the entire evening sulking under his comforter.



"Lan Wangji!" Wangji stiffened when he heard the dulcet, familiar voice called out to him. He had been avoiding his neighbors for the past week, citing some work emergency (he didn't lie, some intern had messed up the layout so he been working hard fixing it). It was bad luck he had to go home early that day.

"Wei Wuxian." He turned and see his neighbor walking toward him, loaded with some grocery bags. Being the person he is, Wangji wordlessly grabbed the grocery bags from Wuxian as they entered the elevator together.

"Thanks for that. Qing-jie was supposed to do the grocery run this week but she has a symposium to go to last minute while A-Ning was called in for one of his patients." Wuxian explained. "Really, it's like they're treating me like a house-husband or something." He laughed to himself.

"Qing-jie? A-Ning?" Wangji was confused.

"Oh, right, I never told you about them. You met Wen Ning before, right? He and Wen Qing is A-Yuan's cousins and my housemates. Well, Qing-jie is when she's not in the nearby hospital working as a neurosurgeon and A-Ning only come home on weekends from his pediatrician fellowship at the hospital across town." Wuxian whistled in triumph as he finally fished out his keys from his bag, not noticing Wangji's bewildered expression.

"So... you're not dating anyone of them?" He asked in confusion.

Wuxian laughed. "Goodness no, they're like my siblings. Plus I'm too busy working on my project and babysitting A-Yuan to even think about dating." They finally arrived at their floor, Wuxian grinned as he took back the bag of groceries from Wangji. "Thanks for this. You're my hero." He playfully blew him a kiss before entering his apartment.

Leaving Wangji outside to have yet another nervous breakdown.

*HE WAS HIS NEIGHBOUR?!!*

*WEI WUXIAN IS STILL SINGLE?!!*

Why the heck did he spent the last week wallowing over something stupid?!



Slowly Wangji reconnected with his thankfully clueless-to-his-inner-turmoil's neighbors, accepting their food and plying them with pretty things and sweet treats he can find.

That weekend, A-Yuan had excited invited him over for (in his words) a baking date.

He knocks, smiling as A-Yuan opens the door, grinned up at him as he playfully dragged Wangji into the kitchen. "We're making cookies and ice cream bread today!!" A-yuan cheered.

As they walked past the living room and the kitchen, Wangji marveled how warm and cozy the place was, compared to his cool, sterile apartment. For a moment, he yearns for the warmth to be his own.

"Wangji you came!"

Wangji stopped. Wei Wuxian looked absolutely divine, framed by the mellow afternoon sun streaming from the kitchen window.

The 'Kiss the Chef' apron is not helping, he thought as he mentally beat his head against something hard.

"You made it." Wuxian looked pleased to see Wangji. "We're trying out some recipes A-Yuan and I found on the internet and we're excited to see you join us today."

A-Yuan giggled as the two help him into a floral pink apron (it belongs to my sister, Wuxian explained wryly) before the young boy dragged him to the table full of ingredients and baking equipments, sitting on his lap.

"We even got you some vegan ice cream to add in the bread." Wuxian smiled, picking up the Jude Honey Comb ice cream tub he left out earlier joining them at the table. "All we got to do it to melt the ice cream, which it already is and mix them into the self-rising flour."

"Now," Wei Wuxian leaning in from behind, whispering right into the shell of Wangji's ear, causing him to experience a full-body shiver, "just fold the two ingredients together until it is mixed."

Wangji was startled as A-Yuan shifted on his lap, holding a bowl of rainbow sprinkles. "Can we add the sprinkles now, Xian Gege?"

"In a minute, Yuan-er." The laugh in his voice sends shivers down to his very bones. "We have to make sure there's no lump of flour in the mix."

Wangji felt he was combusted then and there as Wuxian's arm reached around him like a warm hug as he reaches for the bread tin. "Now, help Ji-gege pour this into the tin so we can put it into the oven to bake." He stepped away to put the tin into the oven, letting Wangji to get moment to catch his breath and heart.

Helping them to clean up the kitchen, Wangji couldn't help but smile as he watches Wuxian helps A-Yuan with washing up.

"You're very good at this." He blurted out, blushing furiously as he realized he was heard.

Wuxian smiled wryly. "I try my best. It's hard work but the reward is worth it."

Wangji couldn't help himself and reach out to cup Wuxian's cheek. "You truly are the most beautiful person I ever met."

And lean in to kiss him.

The hitch of breath as Wuxian reciprocate his kiss made his heart soar as he pulls him closer...

"Xian-gege!! Ji-gege!! The bread!!" A-Yuan sang out, not realizing the two adults making out behind him.

"C-Coming!!" Wuxian smiled sheepishly at Wangji as they untangled from each other. "Let me get the bread out!"

Wangji leaned against the kitchen countertop, smiling as he watched Wuxian explains about cooling time to A-Yuan as they set the bread on the cooling tray. They may haven't discuss the kiss or the relationship yet but Wangji had a strong feeling it will be just fine between the two of them.



### Omake:

"Wei Wuxian makes you food?" Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian's foster brother and Wen Qing on and off boyfriend, asked skeptically, his drink left forgotten on his hand. "That Wei Wuxian?"

Wangji sniffed. Wuxian had invited him to have dinner with his siblings and Jiang Cheng had rubbed him at the wrong way especially on how he thought they were joking about them dating each other.

Wen Ning shyly intervened as he walked past them to put another dish onto the dinner table. "Xian-ge is really cooking nowadays. Even Qing-jie said his lunchboxes were good."

"What a minute, the butternut lasagna you fed me the other day was really from Wuxian?!" he turned incredulously at Wen Qing, who glared at him. "Of course! I told you that several time already."

"I thought you were pulling my legs!"

"A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli came to the dining table carrying a big pot of savoury pork and lotus root stew with her, "That's not nice. A-Xian is really grown up now, he really helped out in the kitchen today. In fact, A-Xian," she turned to him, last to the table bearing a bowl of roasted butternut squash soup with him, "you must share me your recipe for the soup, I think A-Xuan would love it." As one Wuxian and Cheng pulled the same identical face of disgust at the mention of Yanli's fiancé.

"Here Wangji, have some of this since you can't have jie's stew." He grinned as he passed the bowl of the squash soup to him before sitting beside him.

"This is really good." Jiang Cheng finally agreed as he took a bite of the tofu stir-fry. Oddly the stir fry and the soup looked quite red compared to the other dishes on the table. Wangji silently reached for the stir-fry when Yanli stopped him. "I don't think that would be a good idea. Try the braised bamboo shoot instead."

"I tend to be, ah, generous when I spice my meal." Wuxian smirked. Noticing Wangji's confused looks, he quickly added, "I never add them to your food cos you seem like a person who can't handle spice."

"Generous? You landed Jin Zixuan into hospital when he accidentally ate you chilli." Jiang Cheng hooted in laughter, Wen Qing giggling.

Wangji frowned. It can't be that spicy right?

He took a bite of the tofu.

Oh.

So that's why they tried to stop him to eating it.

Wangji politely swallowed the spicy tofu, inwardly weeping at the burning sensation.

Jiang Cheng snorted into his soup as other politely turned their heads away to hide their laughing eyes.



# Love Buns

by Czeriah  
Art by ValeWeaves

*"I knew* this wouldn't turn out well."

There was batter everywhere. Jin Zixuan looked down at himself and frowned: he had somehow managed to keep most of it in the mixing bowl, but a quick look informed him that he still got some on the ceiling. There was flour all over the table, the butter had exploded in the microwave—and if the smell was any indication, the milk on the stove had burnt.

"How?"

For some reason, his elbow was smeared with chocolate. He hadn't even taken it out yet! It was still supposed to be in its wrapping paper! Why the hell did he think this would be a good idea?

It had all started as what he thought would be a nice gesture for his almost-maybe-finally-girlfriend Jiang Yanli. Their love story hadn't really started as a fairytale, since he had been a jerk to her all through middle and high school. Her brothers made a point to remind him of that very fact each time he was within hearing range. But he had grown up. His mother knocked some sense into him! He made actual friends in college, two of them. They had shown him the error of his ways, and one was even a woman. Progress.

SPLAT. Great. Now, the batter was on his head, instead of on the ceiling.

This was going well.

Saturday was supposed to be their first date. Or at least, the first official one without a group activity, just the two of them for an extended period of time, and he wanted to do something nice, you know. He had learned that Yanli enjoyed cooking, sweet things and soft animals. He didn't really want to gift her a kitten or a bunny just yet, and he's been mindful of zoos and other 'captive' animals since he got caught up in an animated conversation between her brothers and his cousins about zoos and other unfriendly places for animals.

He couldn't really ask her to cook something for her own present (that, too, he had learned the hard way...) so: baking her something it was.

The problem was that he was rubbish at this. He had thought of asking the kitchen staff for help, but doing this at his own home, where his cousins could turn up at any moment, was a bad idea to say the least. So, he found a place he could rent and hopefully not burn down, and tried to bake some cinnamon rolls by himself.

The recipe didn't look complicated on paper, Yanli herself had made a vlog about it! He was following her instructions on his iPad so he could try to make the rolls AND watch her while doing it! The plan was flawless!

So he had rolled up his sleeves and tried.

And failed, apparently.

The good thing was, it was still pretty early in the day, and he had the place rented for the next three days.

He watched as another piece of batter fell on the floor in front of him while the sweet voice of his maybe-girlfriend on video was telling him to roll something... and, with a sigh, took out his phone and sent a desperate message to the group chat he had with Luo Qingyang and Lan Wangji:

Me :



"When you said you needed help, you should have told me you had a body to take care of."

Luo Qingyang arrived with Lan Wangji in tow fifteen minutes after his desperate message requesting help. Jin Zixuan had purposefully not disclosed why he needed them, and tried to clean up the kitchen as much as he could with little success while he waited for them. How had he managed to become such a disaster? When did it go wrong? He remembered baking yogurt cakes when he was a child in kindergarden and nothing had caught on fire, so what happened?

He was on all fours on the floor when his two friends had arrived and he could already feel the weight of the judgment in Wangji's face.

"I can explain!...Wait, which body are you talking about?"

"Yours, obviously, after the owner of this place finds out what you've done to it. Zixuan, what were you thinking?"

"I...I just wanted to bake something nice for Yanli, but..."

"Clearly, it didn't go as you thought it would."

Qingyang walked up to him and crouched down to try and help gather some of the batter on his right with some paper towel, while Wangji was making his way to the counter top, looking around curiously and nodding at the iPad, the sweet face of a smiling Yanli now frozen in place with a plate of freshly baked cinnamon rolls.

"I tried making the cinnamon rolls that Yanli made a Vlog about a couple weeks ago. She told me that she really enjoyed them, and I thought they would be a nice touch for our date, you know. For once, she wouldn't be the one to bring something."

The low tenor of Wangji's voice answered him, "Mn, shows that you listen to her. Good idea."

"Exactly! But..."

"Clearly, that didn't account for your kitchen ....inexperience?"

"The recipe said it was easy!"

Now that his two friends were here, the clean-up went much more smoothly, and it took only a couple more minutes for the kitchen to finally stop looking like something had exploded in it. Qingyang rolled her sleeves up and turned toward him.

"Well, show us that recipe. I'm sure the three of us can handle it."

Zixuan gave her a copy of the recipe book Yanli had used in her video.



He relied on her vlog during his first try, but he thought that she might be happy to see the recipe book on his bookshelves if he ever invited her over. The pages were splattered with egg yolk, and the lower left corner had clearly been soaked in milk at some point, but the text was mercifully still legible.

While Wangji and Qingyang were engrossed in the book, he grabbed his iPad to rewind the video back to the start, smiling with fondness at Yanli's sweet face on the thumbnail.

"Okay, stop mooning over your girlfriend and let's try this again." Qingyang said, organizing a few clean bowls on the counter while Wangji tied on an apron. "Start by weighting out your ingredients, and we'll see how it goes from there."

Zixuan felt tears in his eyes. His friends were the best.



"They are not rising."

"Why are you looking at me like that Wangji! I did everything you asked!"

"Obviously not."

His friend was so cruel. He did everything Wangji asked! He put the milk on the stove to warm and added the yeast on time!

"Are you sure the milk wasn't too hot when you put it in?"

"What do you mean 'too hot'?"

The sigh that came out of his friend was longer than the latest drama his mother just started watching.

"You killed it," Wangji said, before turning around and doing something on his phone. "It's dead."

"What do you mean, killed it?"

"He means that yeast should be put in body-temperature milk, not hotter. Boiling milk will kill the yeast, so that's why the dough isn't rising."

Zixuan stared at Qingyang for a few seconds, bewildered. How was he supposed to know that? Was it written down somewhere, or did everyone just assumed that people knew how to not murder yeast?

"Don't look like the universe has forsaken you, Zixuan. It's not as cute as Yanli says it is. Also, killing the yeast is like a rite of passage, don't sweat it."

She patted his head and went off to dispose of the dough—or make something else with it, though Zixuan no longer cared at this point. This was starting to look like the worst idea he'd ever had. Why didn't he just buy her a nice present, like jewelry?

More desolate than ever, Zixuan started cleaning the kitchen all over again.



The answer of what Wangji had been doing arrived in the form of his maybe-probably-most-certainly-girlfriend's brothers about half an hour later. Wangji had been waiting near the door, while Qingyang and Zixuan watched the vlog again, pausing to point out important moments and devise a plan of attack. (As it happens, Yanli *did* mention the thing with the yeast).

Now, If Zixuan was honest with himself and the world, he could admit that he was happy to see Yanli's brothers, since both of them often helped with Yanli's Youtube channel. But he wasn't often honest with himself—if he was, Zixuan would have to admit that his father was an asshole, and he hadn't gotten there in therapy just yet. And so, he only threw an annoyed look at Wangji, who took great pleasure in ignoring him and walked straight into his boyfriend's arms to hug him.

"ZhanZhan!"

"Wei Ying."

"I missed you so much!"

"I missed Wei Ying too."

"Lan Zhan!"

The exchange could have probably continued for a while longer if a tall figure in purple hadn't shoulder-checked Wei Wuxian straight out of the embrace on his way to the middle of the room.

"You saw him this morning,," Jiang Wanyin said angrily, dragging his brother away from Wangji. "Now what the hell is going on, and why is the peacock covered in flour?"

For the first time ever, Zixuan was actually happy to see Jiang Wanyin. Mostly, he was glad that someone else was tired of the two lovebirds in the room. He wasn't looking forward to all the sour remarks that were sure to come his way, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

He had half a mind to let Luo Qingyang explain the situation, but something told him that the impending roast would be worse if the story came from anyone but him.

"I'm trying to bake for your sister and I am failing spectacularly. Please help."

The silence that followed was of short respite, but the hysterical laughter from the Jiang brothers certainly was not.

"Wei Ying. Be nice."

"But Lan Zhan! It's hilarious! The peacock is trying to *bake* for my *sister*, an actual *chef*."

"Yes, and instead of laughing, you should appreciate his efforts in the hope of pleasing her."

"Well, maybe you're right."

"Also, we'd better make sure he doesn't poison her," Jiang Wanyin muttered. "What are you trying to make?"

"Cinnamon rolls."

"Hm, good choice. Making them rise is the hardest part, but the rest is pretty straightforward," Jiang Wanyin told him. "And this recipe is harder than it looks, so don't be too hard on yourself."

Zixuan nodded.

"So what am I supposed to do now?"

Jin Zixuan spent the next several hours grinding cardamom, sifting flour, warming milk and adding yeast...and mixing. So much mixing.

"Zixuan, care to explain how you rented the only professional kitchen without an electric mixing bowl?" Jiang Wanyin demanded, after twenty straight minutes of mixing. "This is exhausting."

"Don't ask me. Huaisang recommended this place. He said his Da-ge loved it."

"That explains it, Da-ge hates mixing bowls. He says the dough doesn't taste the same if you don't sweat while you mix it," said Wei Wuxian, whose voice was issuing from behind one of the doors Zixuan assumed led to a cabinet.

"Well, that's hardly surprising," Jiang Wanyin sighed. "What the fuck are you doing in there?"

"I found the spices! Chengcheng, why don't we add some chili powder?"

"No! Do you want to kill A-Jie?"

"But, remember, she said that some chili could help bring out more sweetness from the chocolate!"

"I have no recollection of that. Plus, I'm not sure your definition of 'some' is the same as hers."

Qingyang laughed. Beside her, Wangji finally put the dough down on the counter, judging that it had been mixed well enough. After that, he covered the dough with a clean rag and set it near the warm stove to let it proof.

"It should take about an hour for the dough to double in size!" Yanli's gentle voice explained from the iPad. "If it doesn't, it's probably because of the yeast. But if you followed all the steps, I'm sure it will be perfect."

Famous last words, probably.



"I don't understand what went wrong this time."

The dough had risen nicely, and everyone had a good time shaping it! They rolled the pastries out together, working in groups of two—Wuxian and Wangji, Quinyang and Zixuan, and Wanyin working by himself—but none of the rolls were salvageable.

Wuxian put chili on his when Wangji wasn't looking, and despite the fact that the actual baking had gone well, the rolls were so spicy that they were painful to look at.

Jiang Wanyin's were too small, since he forgot about the second proofing step.

Qingyang was looking at hers and Zixuan's cinnamon rolls in despair. Half of them were burnt with uncooked centers, and the other half were so hard that they were inedible.

Zixuan buried his face in his hands, distraught.

"I give up. It's not meant to be"

"What do you mean? You can't do that to A-Jie!

She's been looking forward to your date for days!"

"What—no, not the date, the cooking! And what do you mean, she's looking forward to it?"

Wei Wuxian crossed his arms over his chest.

"Don't ask me why, but she's been fretting every day since you asked her out."

"But..." Zixuan paused, incredulous. "Why would she be excited to see me? I mean, I'm surprised she even said yes!"

"Trust us, it's not for the lack of people trying to change her mind." said Jiang Wanyin. "She can make her own decisions, and for some reason, she wants to give you another chance, so don't screw it up."

Unfortunately for all of them, night had fallen and it would be impossible to make another batch now.

"Let's regroup tomorrow and try again." Qingyang offered. "It's not like I had plans anyway"

It took them another half hour to finish cleaning the kitchen. Zixuan could feel the weariness starting to weigh on him, but he refused to give up.

"Let's meet tomorrow at ten o'clock, for those of you who still want to help. I'll understand if you choose to stay home."

The group nodded, and parted ways.



The weather had been dreary all week; but it finally cheered up a bit the next morning, so Zixuan decided to walk to the rented kitchen instead of taking a cab. The sun was out, the birds were singing, and he could almost hear Yanli's voice in his head saying "A-Xuan! Hi! Good morning!"

Wait.

That wasn't in his head.

In front of him in all her perfect glory was Jiang Yanli. Her lovely purple dress billowed in the light breeze as she was coming toward him from where she came towards him from the rented kitchen building. Her long hair was tied in twin ponytails floating around her face, framing her pretty heart-shaped face. Her smile was as blinding as the sun, and Zixuan was half convinced that he was either still asleep or hallucinating.

"...What are you doing here?" he blurted. "Wait, no, I'm happy to see you! How are you?"

Her laugh could have soothed a volcano.

"My brothers spilled what you were doing yesterday. Now, don't be annoyed with them—you know they can't lie to me. I just asked what they were doing, and they didn't even blink before telling me."

"But it was supposed to be a surprise!"

"And it was! But you know, as much as I'd enjoy anything you baked for me, I think I would love to bake *with* you even more." He could see the mischief in her eyes. "And apparently, you really need some help."

The next few minutes passed by in a blur. Zixuan must have opened the door and tuned on the lights, but the next thing he could remember was Yanli, twirling around in the kitchen while putting on an apron and telling him:

"Let's make some cinnamon buns together, A-Xuan!"

Oh, yes.

He was definitely in love with her.





## Chocolate Cinnamon Rolls | easy!

70.512 views - 5 months ago



Yanli-jie's Kitchen



SUBSCRIBED





# Chocolate Cinnamon Rolls

## Ingredients (make 12-13)

### Dough :

**570 ml / 2 ⅓ cups** of lukewarm milk

**150g / ⅔ cup** caster sugar

**45g / 3 cakes** fresh yeast OR **14g / 2 envelopes** (4 ½ teaspoons) of easy blend/active dried yeast

**1** teaspoon cardamon seeds, crushed.

**180g / 1 ½ sticks** unsalted butter, melted

**1** egg

**1 kg / 8 cups** plain / all purpose flour



**1**

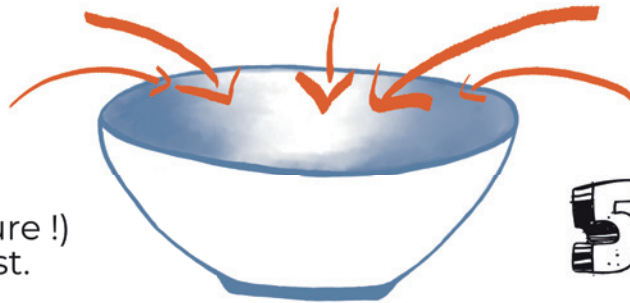
Caster Sugar + Eggs,  
mix until smooth.

**2**

Grind and add the  
cardamon

**3**

Melt and add the  
butter



**4**

Warm the milk  
(body temperature !)  
and add the yeast.

**5**

Add the milk+yeast and  
flour gradually until you  
reach the wanted  
consistency

### NOTE

This is basically a brioche dough, so the more you work it, the airier and light it will be ! you can work it by hand until the dough doesn't stick too much to your hands.

**6**

Put the dough in a clean bowl, cover it with a clean towel and let it prove in a warm place for an hour.

**7**

After an hour, punch the dough and transfer it to a lightly floured surface.

**8**

Using a rolling pin, roll it out until it's about 30 x 80cm / 12 x 31 inches and 7 mm / ¼ inches thick.

### NOTE

I usually cut the dough in half and do it in two times because I don't have much space, it ask for a bit of logistic if you have a small kitchen !



## Filling :

**100g / 6 ½** tablespoons unsalted butter, softened at room temperature

**100 g / 1** cup packed dark brown soft sugar

Cinnamon (*at least 3 tablespoons, but honestly, put as much or as little as you prefer ?*)

At least **85g** of baking chocolate (*I do prefer milk chocolate, depending on the dark chocolate you use you might want to add more sugar to the filling, I never tried with white.*)

Cut in flakes.

9

Spread the **melted butter** on the surface of your dough

10

Using a spoon, sprinkle your mix of **cinnamon/ chocolate /brown sugar** depending of your taste

11

Roll the dough from the long side, cut roughly **6cm/2 ½ inches rolls**.

12

Cut them as an angle so they have a trapezoidal shape



13

Carefully transfer the buns on prepared baking sheets, with the longest side of the bun sitting on the sheet

14

Cover with dish towel again and let them prove in a warm place for **30 to 60 minutes** (*until almost double in size*)

15

Preheat the oven at 200°C (400°F), gas 6

16

Glaze the buns with an egg, butter and caster sugar.

17

Bake the buns for 20-25 minutes or until golden brown, and enjoy =3



## NOTE

They are best on baking day, you can pop them for 30 second to a minute in the microwave for a couple days after baking them.



# APPLE PIE

## steps:

1. AFTER PREHEATING THE OVEN TO 425°F/220°C, SET APPLES AND PASTRY ASIDE AND MELT THE REST OF THE INGREDIENTS TOGETHER

## ingredients:

8 GRANNY SMITH APPLES  
2 9" PIE PASTRY  
1/4 CUP OF WATER  
1/2 CUP OF UNSALTED BUTTER  
3 TABLESPOONS FLOUR  
1/2 CUP WHITE SUGAR  
1/2 CUP BROWN SUGAR

## optional:

A PINCH OF SALT  
2 TEASPOONS CINNAMON  
1/4 TEASPOONS NUTMEG  
A TABLESPOON LEMON JUICE  
VANILLA EXTRACT

AND... CHILLI OIL???

2. PLACE PASTRY IN A 9 INCH PAN AND FILL IT WITH APPLES, PEELED AND SLICED, AND THEN POUR THE MIXTURE IN!

3. DECORATE!

4. BAKE FOR 15 MINUTES BEFORE REDUCING TEMPERATURE TO 350 F. CONTINUE BAKING FOR 40 MINUTES.

5. LET IT COOL DOWN, ADD TOPPINGS, AND

*enjoy!*











# Marble chocolate cheesecake

by ahhhnorealnamesallowed

Art by nerdzeword

**Wei Ying** was in the middle of trying to follow the instructions on his third how-to-make-a-cheesecake YouTube tutorial when A-Yuan, helper extraordinaire, happily (and loudly, for him) greeted Lan Wangji as he entered the flat.

"Ba! Welcome home!"

Wei Ying could hear Lan Wangji taking off his shoes and jacket, setting them neatly in place, as he scrambled to quietly hide the fact that he had been baking. It was not an easy task, considering how many empty bowls of cream cheese and eggs and sugar he had left lining the counter and cluttering the sink. He really should have let A-Yuan help him clean up between batches, but he really wanted to do this on his own.

Wei Ying could hardly hear Lan Wangji's quiet greeting of "A-Yuan, how are you?" and probably would have been caught shoving half-baked cheesecake into the back of the freezer, had A-Yuan not been so good at his job as both a warning alarm and a distraction.

"Ba, what did you do today?" A-Yuan was still a little louder than he typically was, and a little frantic too. If Wei Ying didn't know exactly what had his son in a tizzy, he'd have been concerned. Lan Wangji, always overprotective and completely unaware that A-Yuan was helping Wei Ying with a surprise cheesecake sometime in the future, sounded extremely worried even as he answered A-Yuan's question.

Wei Ying wanted to listen to his son and his Lan Zhan talk, but he had to focus! He still had to load the dishwasher and wipe the counters, and there were beaters and wooden spoons and spring form pans... Baking left behind so much mess, he wondered how his jiejie can manage both baking and cooking at the same time!

Luckily, Lan Wangji was both attentive and doting, while A-Yuan was brilliant—and Wei Ying was speedy when it came to hiding evidence of mischief—so it wasn't long before Wei Ying was able to join Lan Zhan and A-Yuan in the living room.

"Welcome home, Lan Zhan!" He was a little breathless, and if A-Yuan's gesturing at his own face was any indication, covered in *something*, but that honestly wasn't anything Wei Ying wasn't used to.

"Hello, Wei Ying. What have you been up to?" Lan Wangji's question was sincere and without suspicion—he didn't notice anything amiss, yet. Wei Ying was grateful.

"Oh, nothing, nothing." Waving his hands, Wei Ying brushed past his son and his Lan Zhan. He could feel whatever was on his cheek beginning to harden and wanted to wash it off before he forgot about it. "I'll be back in just a sec to talk to you, though, I had planned to shower before you got home..." Wei Ying trailed off as Lan Wangji grabbed his wrist, pulling him into a soft embrace. Wei Ying giggled, still flustered by Lan Wangji's obvious adoration.

"What does Wei Ying want for dinner?" Lan Wangji asked, dropping a quick kiss on his messy fringe.

"Aiyah, Lan Zhan, ask your son, he can pick. I need to shower before I ruin your nice clothes!" And with that, he rushed off to the bathroom, completely failing to notice the slightest look of hurt and confusion in Lan Wangji's eyes.



He was doing better this time, Wei Ying thought. Having his jiejie right there with him, teaching him the best way to clean as he goes, giving him tips on when to switch tasks, and having a plethora of ridiculously expensive baking equipment, was a huge help.

It still wasn't actually *going* well, if the face Jin Ling had made when he had casually licked off a finger he had stuck into fresh cheesecake batter was any indication. Wei Ying tried it, too, and yep, gross. Sure, before everything was baked, and with the number of bricks of cream cheese all blended together, it isn't really supposed to be sweet, but he must have done something wrong, somewhere, to end up with a flavour like *that*.

"Jie," Wei Ying whined, "I messed up! I know I did! What did I do wrong?"

Jiang Yanli, the best and most wonderful older sister-slash-cook-slash-baker, laughed at him. "What's wrong, Xianxian? It looks right." And like her son and brother before her, she stuck her finger into the batter. And, while she was too polite and too good to make the same face of disgust that Jin Ling and Wei Ying had made, there was a look in her eyes. Wei Ying knew what she was going to say before she managed to find the nice words she was looking for.

"It tastes *terrible*!" It was a dramatic wail, complete with full-body flailing, but Wei Ying was legitimately distraught. This was his third attempt today, and the one he was most confident in. If he couldn't even manage with *jiejie* supervising him, how could he be expected to make one on his own?

"Wei Ying," his jiejie began, an unusual wariness in her tone, "can you show me where you got your sugar from?"

*Uh oh.* That was never a good tone of voice to hear from Yanli-jie. Wei Ying gestured helplessly at the large glass jar sitting on the counter, clearly full of perfectly white sugar crystals.

"You used this one," Jiang Yanli confirmed, "not the one from the pantry? This one, that was on the counter?"

Even Jin Ling was giving Wei Ying a *look* now, the brat. Wei Ying simply nodded.

"Well," his jiejie smiled guiltily, "I know what you did wrong! It's my fault, I'm so sorry. I didn't even consider it—"

"Jiejie, what is it?"

"You used salt instead of sugar, A-Xian. I put the sugar back in the pantry, along with the flour, when we cleaned up after the last batch. I'm so used to keeping the salt on the counter and the sugar in the pantry that I don't even notice how similar the jars look anymore. I'm so sorry, Xianxian!"

And, well, it's not like Wei Ying could actually be mad at his perfect sister.



He hadn't actually planned on telling Xichen-ge, but A-Yuan and little Lan Jingyi were closer than brothers, and A-Yi couldn't not tell Lan Xichen about Wei Ying's plan once he learned about it. But Lan Xichen was also a good baker, and a doting older brother, so he offered up his own kitchen to Wei Ying and himself and the boys as a distraction.

Lan Wangji didn't often get to spend time with his brother, and as much as he tried to get Wei Ying to join them on their family outing, Wei Ying had stayed firm. He and Xichen-ge had a plan, and Lan Zhan's pout and puppy eyes weren't going to make him fold.

Okay, it almost had. Especially as Lan Zhan had shot him a sad look while his brother herded him out the door, Wei Ying waving and smiling at them all from doorway.

But Lan Xichen's kitchen had a stand mixer and the second-fanciest oven he had ever seen, so it was an outing he was willing to sacrifice.

And maybe, this time, without any distractions, he would be able to successfully make a cheesecake.

Finally.



The YouTube spiral at Lan Xichen's place — leaving three cheesecakes burnt or otherwise destroyed, and one of Wei Ying's hands lightly burnt — proved that he needed supervision.

Luckily, he had the best, most wonderful, most responsible son in the world, who was willing to sit at the kitchen table, read out instructions and measurements, and clean beaters and empty bowls as Wei Ying prepared batch after batch of cheesecake, trying to find the perfect recipe.

He'd done Japanese style, but it didn't turn out properly.

He'd done a more traditional New York Style, but it was too plain, and as much as Lan Wangji likes both sweets and fruits, he's extremely picky about comfitures, and Wei Ying didn't want to make an entire cake from scratch only to have to settle for a premade jam or sauce.

He was in the middle of trying a marbled cheesecake, worrying over melting chocolate on the stovetop—should he try a *bain-marie*? Could he just melt the baker's chocolate in a small saucepan without adding anything?—when he heard the door to the flat unlock. He shot a frantic glance at both the clock on the stove and his cream cheese covered son. A-Yuan met his eyes with wide ones of his own; Lan Wangji was early, completely without notice.

There was no time to clean up. There wasn't even time to hide the main pieces of evidence: the stand mixer, the beaters still in A-Yuan's hand, the bowl still coated in cheesecake batter from Wei Ying's last attempt, that cheesecake currently in the oven. Wei Ying had to focus on distraction and prevention.

He rushed to the entrance to the kitchen, trying to stop Lan Wangji from entering before he even tried.

"Lan Zhan! Welcome home! You're early!!" Wei Ying was aware that his voice sounded somewhat strained, and the ever-perceptive Lan Wangji obviously noticed, if the speed at which he turned his head was any indication.

"Wei Ying, I thought we could take A-Yuan and A-Yi to the cinema tonight, so that da-ge can have a quiet night in. Is that...alright?"

Lan Wangji's hesitance was heartbreaking. Wei Ying was already spouting an agreement when A-Yuan shouted, "Xian-ge!" from the kitchen. With a curse, Wei Ying spun around and sprinted right back to the oven, even as he tries to verbally shoo Lan Wangji out of the room.

"Welcome home, ba!" A-Yuan chirped, still sitting at the table, beater still in hand, white goop smeared around his lips and on his cheeks from the unwieldy metal. It was at moments like that, when Wei Ying was scrambling around madly while A-Yuan watched without helping, that he truly realised that the kid was his son. Lan Wangji's son would *never*.

"How are you, A-Yuan? How was your day?"

"I'm good, thank you. Did you say that you are taking A-Yi and I to the movies tonight? What are we going to see?"

"Go wash up and change if you want to go to the movies—you can't go out with your baba looking like that," Wei Ying scolded, trying to wave his son and Lan Wangji out of the kitchen while hiding the entire cheesecake he was trying to safely remove from the oven. He could hear the light *thud* of A-Yuan jumping out of his chair and he could only hope that his son was dragging Lan Wangji with him into the other room.

Looking at the cheesecake in his oven-mitted hands, Wei Ying smiled. He would have the rest of the night to work on the marble cheesecake, and hopefully he won't burn that one, too.



It was their six-month anniversary and Wei Ying had been planning it for the past six months.

The moment he and Lan Wangji had officially started dating, after being friends since secondary school, and after living together all through university and well into their late 20s, even raising a baby A-Yuan together whenever Wen Ning or Wen Qing needed, until they had been named his legal guardians when he started kindergarten—basically, Wei Ying *knew* the moment he and Lan Zhan had their first real, official date, that he would be proposing at the six-month mark. There was simply no other option.

So, Wei Ying had been planning. It couldn't be an elaborate proposal, because Lan Wangji likes to be quietly made a fuss over, in small gestures and thoughtful remembrances. It couldn't be a public proposal, because there is fun-embarrassing and not-fun-embarrassing, and having too many outsiders witness his own vulnerability is not-fun-embarrassing for Wei Ying. And, more than anything, the proposal had to be *perfect*. Because Lan Zhan was perfect, and he deserved perfection.

Thus, cheesecake. Because, hidden behind his stoic mask, Lan Wangji had a massive sweet tooth. And, while cheesecake wasn't really *that* sweet, it was one of the few desserts Lan Wangji would consistently order when they go out for dinner, or if he saw it in a display at a café; he would even buy it full-priced from a grocery store. It was, out of all the sweets and candies and pastries and cakes, his absolute favourite.

For the past three months, Wei Ying had been trying to learn how to bake a cheesecake. He started with those simple 'no bake' ones from YouTube, the ones in Mason jars, but they weren't quite *right*, somehow. But the moment he involved an oven, everything became more difficult and complicated.

But, finally, after so much time and effort, with the help of his sister and Xichen-ge and Wen Ning and A-Yuan, the final attempt had been made. If this cheesecake failed, it was over. It needed to be refrigerated for at least 3 hours, and he and Lan Wangji were taking A-Yuan to the zoo for the day so that he could celebrate with them, and they were leaving in the next hour or so. There wouldn't be time to make and bake another cheesecake before leaving, and there wouldn't be time when they get back.

Nothing could go wrong!!!

And so, Wei Ying was hovering in the kitchen, going between kneeling at the oven door, face almost pressed to the glass, to wandering restlessly in circles.

He'd cleaned everything. He'd put everything away. He was covered in flour and sugar and needed to shower, but he couldn't leave the room. He was trying to keep a conversation going with Wen Ning, but he wasn't able to concentrate, because he was so worried that the moment he looked away, the cheesecake would burn.

"Bake 1 hour or until centre is almost set," he muttered, not for the first time. "What does that mean? What is 'almost' set? I should have asked jie..." Wei Ying had assumed, that with the number of cheesecakes he had made over the past three months, one of them would have set up properly, but looking back, he's not sure if any of them actually had.

Had he really overcooked or burnt them all?

Was he that terrible of a cook?

No wonder Lan Wangji did all the cooking—what happened if this cheesecake, the anniversary cheesecake, the *proposal* cheesecake failed and Lan Zhan decided to say no to Wei Ying's proposal because Wei Ying couldn't bake or cook or clean and was a bad housewife and he couldn't be expected to marry a man who couldn't even be a homemaker—

Wei Ying's catastrophizing was interrupted by the oven timer. Wei Ying rushed back to his position at the glass door.

He slowly, carefully, cracks the door open.

Hot air billowed into his face, forcing him to pull his head back.

The cake looked perfect.

He turned off the oven.



They picked up take away on their way back from the zoo, and as an anniversary treat, they ate it on the floor in the living room. Cardboard and plastic boxes clutter the coffee table, and Wei Ying tried to not swear vociferously as Lan Wangji knocked his car off the edge of the map. He *hated* playing Mario Kart with Lan Zhan, but in the best way possible.

When the tournament was over, Lan Zhan having placed in the top three in each race, Wei Ying collapsed back against the couch behind him. “Lan Zhan,” he whined, “you’re such a cheat. You’ll teach our sweet little son bad habits if you keep playing like that.”

Lan Wangji snorted, while A-Yuan perked up. “I’ll be able to play like ba?” he chirped, “Will I be able to beat you, then, ba?”

Lan Wangji huffed a breath and ruffled A-Yuan’s hair. “Mn.”

“Okay, while Lan Zhan teaches you how to *cheat* at Mario Kart, I guess I’ll get dessert.” Wei Ying noticed that Lan Wangji doesn’t even bother denying the cheating charge, focused as he was on helping A-Yuan pick the best car. He would keep that in mind for later. After all, it’s good for Lan Zhan to get teased every once in a while, and Wei Ying did it with love.



The cheesecake was, somehow, finally, perfect.

The proposal...wasn’t.

Wei Ying, absolute dumbass that he was, spent more time on the cheesecake prep than on *scripting a proposal*.

So, here he was, trying to kneel for the proposal, but it just seemed like he’s taking a long time to get back into his position on the floor. And Lan Zhan, lovely, wonderful, beautiful, *oblivious*, Lan Wangji, was just... eating the cheesecake.

While Wei Ying was kneeling next to him, ring in hand.

How?

How did these things always happen to Wei Ying?

“L-Lan Zhan?” And, *of course*, his voice breaks *and* he stuttered. Suave. He cleared his throat. A-Yuan is watching, but Lan Wangji still has his eyes closed as he savoured the cake.

Wei Ying cleared his throat again.

“Wei Ying, are you okay?” And, oh no, now Lan Zhan was *concerned* about Wei Ying, and he’s turning and he—

Froze. Eyes wide. Looking at Wei Ying kneeling, holding a plate of cheesecake, *still*, in one hand and a ring in the other.

WHY DIDN’T HE PUT DOWN THE CAKE BEFORE PROPOSING?!

“Ah, Lan Zhan, um...” Okay, deep breath. *Wei Ying, you’ve got this.* “I love you?”

Oh

oH

OH NO!

“Um, what I mean is—that wasn’t a question, obviously, I know I love you. No, see I had another question for you—actually, here, let me put this down, oh, um, the cake, the cake...” Wei Ying floundered, looking for somewhere to set down the plate, but trying not to flail *too* much, and almost set the ring down on the floor beside him instead of the cake.

In his haste to correct himself, he forgot how plates work and, well, maybe Lan Zhan would like him more now that his entire thigh was covered in crushed cookie crust and cheesecake?

Well, that’s the worst over with, right? Time to just roll with it. So, with a bright grin, Wei Ying once again meets Lan Zhan’s eyes. He noticed the red staining his ears, and Wei Ying’s grin widened. “Wanna marry me? I learned how to make cheesecake for you.”

“Wei Ying...” Lan Wangji’s soft sigh was beautiful. All of Lan Zhan was beautiful. Wei Ying hoped he said yes. “Of course. Love Wei Ying, want to marry Wei Ying. Thank you, Wei Ying.”

Wei Ying didn’t expect to cry, but he really probably should have.

But all he could do was smile and laugh and cry as he and Lan Zhan kissed right there on the living room floor and A-Yuan laughed at them.



“Hey Lan Zhan?”

“Yes, Wei Ying?”

“How many cheesecake puns am I allowed to include in my vows?”



# Marbled Chocolate Cheesecake



1 Cookie Crumb  
Pie Crust



1/2 cup Sugar



2 8oz Pckg  
Cream Cheese  
(softened)



1/2 tsp. Vanilla



2 Eggs



1 Box  
Semi-Sweet Chocolate

1 Heat oven to 350 degrees F.

2 Microwave Chocolate on High 1-1/2 min,  
Stir every 30 sec. until chocolate is melted

3 Add 1 pkg. cream cheese, 1/4 cup sugar and 1 egg;  
beat with whisk until well blended.

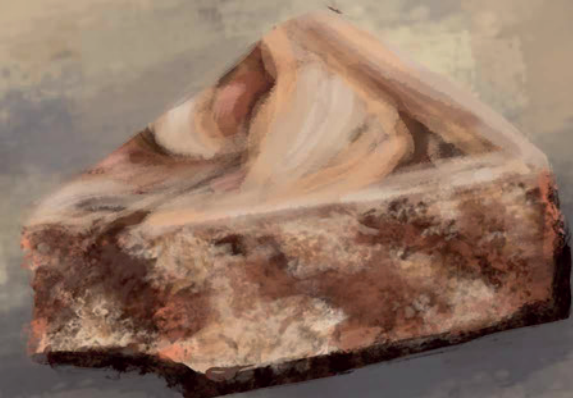
Pour into crust.

4 Beat remaining cream cheese, sugar, egg and vanilla until well blended.  
Spoon over chocolate batter.



5 Stir Gently with a knife  
Bake 40 min. or until center is almost set.

6 Refrigerate 3 hours.









# The five times Wei Wuxian made someone his “signature sunny-side-up toast”, and the one time someone made it for him.

by Nova

## One. Seven

“And then, Yanli-jie, you grate cheese aaaaalll over it! And then you move it to an oven safe plate and put it in the oven! Got it?”

“Got it, A-Ying,” Yanli smiles as she slowly grates cheese across the bread and egg. “Do I make it a whole layer of cheese, or just as a topping?”

“Hmm...I think A-Cheng would like it as a whole layer better!”  
“Whole layer it is.”

Cheese is grated, bread is placed on an oven safe plate and shoved into an oven with eager oven-mitted hands (“Careful, A-Xian, it’s hot!”).

After a little while, A-Xian jumps to check at the oven and promptly pulls Yanli over to take out the toast. “Jiejie, the cheese is already a nice hard layer, time to take it out!”

A heavenly scent wafts out of the oven as she opens it, which only serves to excite A-Xian more as his excited jumps increase in frequency and height.

“It’s perfect!” he exclaims, running over to the kitchen island and picking up the “Happy Birthday” decoration he made himself.

As Yanli carefully sets the plate down next to him, A-Xian sticks the toothpick holding the sign in a corner of the toast, giggling delightedly at the *crunch* it makes. “Now it’s even perfect!” he declares.

“It definitely is very perfect,” Yanli agrees, grabbing a butter knife and fork, setting them next to the plate.

And even more perfect is the timing of A-Cheng walking into the kitchen just as the cutlery *clinks* onto the marble surface, blinking sleepily at the seven-and-ten-year-olds smiling at him.

“Happy birthday, A-Cheng!!” A-Xian yells and runs to gather him in a hug. “You’re seven like me now!”

A-Cheng’s eyes widen in confusion. “Didn’t we have a birthday celebration the day before yesterday for the both of us?”

“Yeah,” A-Xian answers, “but you and Yanli-jie made me a really nice breakfast on my birthday and I wanted to uh-hh,” he turns to Yanli, releasing A-Cheng, “what’s the word again?”

“A-Xian wanted to return the favor,” she says. “It’s called sunny-side-up toast and he asked me to help.”

“It’s suuuuuuper good!” A-Xian pulls his brother over and onto the chair in front of the plate, sitting down next to him. “I even asked Jiejie to give you a whole covering layer of cheese because I know you like it!”

“Woah,” A-Cheng says, because what else can you say to a plate of toast covered in baked cheese.

“Cut it open, A-Cheng,” Yanli tells him. “There’s something else on that toast under the cheese.”

He does as she says and his mouth drops open at the egg in the center. “Egg?” he asks, almost skeptical.

“It’s dee-lish-ous,” A-Xian encourages. “Seriously! Try it!”

His forehead scrunches in doubt, but he cuts himself a piece regardless in response to his brother’s excitement. Yanli discreetly pulls out her camera and hits record.

A-Cheng’s face brightens as soon as he starts crunching, and A-Xian starts laughing happily. “It’s great, right? I told you!”

“T’z heckhinh awes’m,” A-Cheng manages through his bites, and Yanli refrains from admonishing him in case she gets caught recording.

“Heheh, we can make more some other time and I can teach you too!”

“I’ll be glad to help you two,” Yanli smiles, “but A-Xian has to help me clean up and then we’ll ask Baba and Mama to take us out to the aquarium, yeah?”

“YES!” A-Xian yells, A-Cheng swallowing before doing the same. They both grin at her until they notice the camera in her hand.

“Wait, how long have you been recording us?” A-Cheng demands as A-Xian gasps.

Yanli giggles and ducks away as her brothers lunge for her.

## Two. Fourteen

“Hey, Lian-ge, do you have any bread?” Wei Ying asks him as they’re sitting in the kitchen.

“Hm, there should be some on the shelf over there,” he points behind him, and Wei Ying turns to follow his finger. He grins when he spots the yet-unopened bag.

“Do you have butter and cheese?” he says as he stands to grab the bread and goes to the cupboard where he takes out two oven-safe plates.

“Yes,” Xie Lian confirms, “in the fridge, bottom shelf. What are you making?”

Wei Ying goes to the fridge and gets the butter, cheese, and two eggs. Xie Lian looks at them in confusion. It looks like the beginnings of french toast, but he hadn’t grabbed the milk, which is also stored in the fridge.

“You’ll see~” he answers, and Xie Lian smiles and nods.

“I’m sure it’ll be great.”

He watches as Wei Ying takes some butter and puts it on the plate, then puts it in the oven as he preheats it to 180 degrees Celsius.

“Where’s the grater?” he turns to Xie Lian, who points him to the upper shelf of the cupboard on his left. He takes that out and sets it on the counter where he’s set up his workstation before turning to the sink to wash his hands.

Then he takes out the plate from the oven, where the butter has softened a considerable amount. He takes a slice of bread and uses the butter knife to spread the butter over it, before setting the bread on the other plate and using the rest of the butter on another slice of bread, which he puts on the plate that previously had the butter.

“Doesn’t make too much of a difference besides maybe being more toasted,” Wei Ying tells him. “It’ll just go to whoever prefers more crunch.”

Next he uses his fist to form a small dent in the slices of bread, which Wei Ying tells him is more effective and accurate with a glass or some other round and solid item, but it doesn’t do anything other than make it look more tidy.

“And I know neither of you quite care about what your food looks like,” he teases and Xie Lian laughs in response.

When Wei Ying’s next step is to crack the eggs into the pits he made in the bread, Xie Lian doesn’t judge. Wei Ying is full of strange and pleasant surprises.

He does feel his eyebrows raise in amusement, though, when Wei Ying proceeds to grate cheese across the two slices.



It doesn't fully cover it in a complete layer, but there's enough of it to be counted as a main component and not just a topping.

Then he cleans up the cheese that fell outside of the slices and scatters it equally on top of them. "Don't be wasteful!" he chirps.

Grabbing the oven mitts above him, he picks up the two plates and puts them in the oven. Shutting the door, he sits down and stares into the depths of the appliance. "Now we wait."

"For how long?" Xie Lian inquires.

"Until I know it's ready."

He laughs. "Alright then."

His internal clock tells him it's twenty minutes later when Wei Ying goes to turn off the oven and takes out the two steaming plates of toast. He sets one down in front of Xie Lian with a fork and knife, while he takes the knife he'd previously used and a new fork for himself.

"I'm gonna clean up while it cools," he says, then to Xie Lian's forming protests, "it's fine, it's fine, I gotta clean up my own messes. Besides, I made this for you. Me making one for myself is just an added bonus."

Xie Lian knows there's no arguing against him, so despite the nagging voice in his brain telling him how inappropriate it is for a guest to be cleaning, he settles as Wei Ying goes about placing the ingredients back and washing the utensils.

He gives him a grin as he sits back down once he's finished, raising the knife. "开动!"

"开动," Xie Lian echoes fondly as he cuts the toast in half and takes a bite out of the middle.

"It's absolutely delicious, Wei Ying," he smiles, delighted. It tastes terrific.

Wei Ying swallows his bite, then mirrors his delight with a bright beam. "I knew you'd love it."

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### Three. Twenty

"Hey, Lan Zhan!" Wei Ying greets as he swings the door open. "My dorm's a bit of a mess right now, sorry, me and Huaisang haven't found enough time to do a deep enough clean yet," he laughs sheepishly. "I made a snack for us, though. Got any allergies?"

He lets Lan Zhan process his words, to which he pieces together a response. "I'm quite sure I'm already fairly acquainted with your messes," he says, and Wei Ying snorts. "I am not hungry at the moment. But I appreciate the snack, and no, I don't have any food allergies."

Wei Ying smirks. "No food allergies? Do you have a non-food allergy?"

"Abusive authority figures," he deadpans. They both crack up.

"That should be old by now, I swear, why does it just get funnier every time," Wei Ying mutters to himself. "Inside jokes are weird." Then, to Lan Zhan, "Come in, come in, it'll be ready any moment now. You can go ham on cleaning up the designated study space so we can get shit done."

As he's done many times in the past six months since Wei Ying became his friend, Lan Zhan enters and heads straight for the large table in the living area. It's the regular height of a coffee table, but it was an expensive wooden table that looked like a piece cut right out of a tree. Huaisang's tastes was leagues away from Lan Zhan's, but he appreciated it for the easy space it provided for work and other matters.

The two roommates had their own organizing system that they'd established long ago, which Lan Zhan dutifully fol-

lowed every time he helped them clean up. It was convoluted and made little sense to him, but enough that he knew how it worked.

He carefully set the papers to piles in the open shelf underneath the surface, and put stationery back in their designated holders, before taking the nearby chamois cloth to wipe it down of spills, stains, or other dirt of the sort.

Cleaning helped him relax a little more, as his nerves had fired up again when Wei Ying had first opened the door.

He could keep his crush a little subtle, but it didn't take away the fact that a crush was a crush, and his brain reacted the normal way it would when faced with someone he was romantically attracted to: blood rushed to his ears and his heart beat faster, and his stomach felt twisted and floating.

Either way, he was thankful for the opportunity, especially since it had passed the time long enough for Wei Ying to have finished with his snacks.

"I come with carbohydrates for sustenance!" he announces, walking in with two plates in his hands, the faint scent of toast wafting over to where Lan Zhan was preparing materials and equipment.

Lan Zhan points to an empty space where he could set down the plates, and Wei Ying puts down the plates of what seems to be cheese-covered toast, along with knives and forks.

Taking his own stuff from the organized piles, Wei Ying drags a plate closer to him before picking up the entire toast and taking a bite, the toast making a satisfying *crunch*.

"It's coo' now," he says through his chewing, miraculously not spewing any crumbs. "Sho i's fine to hold wih hands."

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan raises an eyebrow at him. "Chew and swallow, not talk."

"Mm, s'r'y. Ish jush very goof." He continues eating with his right while he sets up his things on the table.

Lan Zhan, who is done with his own setup, is not hungry, but is curious, since there is no visible chili or other spicy addition on the toast, but Wei Ying is enjoying it immensely. That's usually a sign the food is insanely delicious, so he pulls over his own plate, and takes the knife to cut it.

Just as he's about to cut off a corner, Wei Ying's clean hand darts out to move his hand with the knife to the middle of the toast, and indicates to slice down the middle.

Shooting a confused look that goes unacknowledged, Lan Zhan cuts the toast through the middle and his eyes widen slightly at the little pit in the toast and what fills it.

"Egg?" he inquires, answered by Wei Ying's nod. Cheese, egg, and toast, not an odd combination, but not a very expected one either. But Wei Ying is full of the delightfully unexpected, so he cuts a piece with the egg in it and takes a bite.

It is delicious, so he tells Wei Ying as much.

Wei Ying, who had finished his bite and put down his toast to watch Lan Zhan's reaction, grins. "It's great, right? I should've made you this a little while back, I don't know why I haven't. It's one of the few good things I make, according to Jiang Cheng."

"Everything Wei Ying makes is good," Lan Zhan replies. "Unfortunately, for everyone else, all that is delicious in your food is drowned out by the burning of chili."

"Aha, Lan Zhan, flatterer and destroyer of Wei Ying," he laughs. "So nice and yet so cruel."

"Continue eating or we will start," Lan Zhan responds, cutting the conversation short.

Wei Ying laughs a little more before turning to devour his food.



#### Four. Twenty-four

"Pass me the grater," Ying-ge says, holding his hand out. Jiang Cheng grabs the tool and places it in his brother's hand handle first.

"Ya think Jin Zixuan's gonna be offended that you made him and Jiejie toast with egg as a wedding gift?" he comments as Ying-ge starts grating cheese across the three slices of bread (Jiejie's appetite is near insatiable when pregnant. She's fortunate she's marrying a Jin).

"Not if Jiejie starts crying," Ying-ge snorts. He pauses. "Not that I want to make her cry, even if they're happy tears."

"Even if you don't want it to happen it will," Jiang Cheng sighs. He opens the already preheated oven and puts on a pair of mitts before taking the plates of toast and placing them delicately inside.

"I have two boxes of tissues ready for this," Ying-ge grins crookedly as he turns to lean against the counter. "You?"

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes. "Pathetic. I've got twice that."

Ying-ge arches backwards dramatically, the back of his hand splayed across his forehead. "Oh no, he's truly prepared, I can barely compare to the amazing arsenal my brother has stocked."

He can't help the grin that spreads across his face. "Jin Zixuan's gonna have some on hand, he'll make up for your shortcoming."

He pouts at that, then grabs the cleaning cloth from the counter and smacks him in the arm with it. Jiang Cheng retaliates by tugging it from him and going for his face, to which Ying-ge screeches and runs around the counter.

They go at it for a while until Ying-ge passes by the oven and turns it off, deeming the toast ready.

Jiang Cheng leaves the cloth and opens the oven to check on them. They smell absolutely glorious, Ying-ge really should open some sort of catering business exclusively for this, he has plenty of people around him who would help.

He mentions this to him, but Ying-ge just shakes his head and smiles. "This is a special recipe just for the people special to me. Not for anyone else."

Jiang Cheng turns his head away. "Gross. Sappy." Then he realizes something and smirks. "Jin Zixuan is special to you now?"

His brother freezes. "Shit," he hangs his head, "I guess he is."

He cackles as he flings the custom-made bag that says "Happy nuclear family!" at Ying-ge. They'll keep the toast in the oven so it'll be at least somewhat nice and crispy, and Lan Zhan will be over later to pack and take them to the venue.

"Get a move on, we need to be there in an hour," Jiang Cheng glances at the clock, which tells him it's a little past eight am. "We still have a lot to prepare."

"Aye-aye, captain," Ying-ge mock salutes as he heads for the stairs, Jiang Cheng right behind him.

(Later, when they present the toast to the newly married couple, Jin Zixuan also starts crying with his wife. It's both the funniest and most awkward part of the entire wedding reception.)



#### Five. Thirty-five

"Lan Zhan is going on an important trip and I need company while I take care of A-Yuan, wanna help?" Wei Ying says as he plops down in his seat at their usual coffee session.

Shen Qingqiu is not a good babysitter in the slightest, and he needs to make sure Wei Ying is fully aware of this.

"Yes, I'm fully aware of your terrible capabilities in caring

for children," his friend rolls his eyes. "I'm not asking you to babysit my five-year-old, Qiu-ge, I'm asking you to keep me company while I take care of my five-year-old because I feel like a wife taking care of the home and family while my husband goes off to war."

"You're definitely exaggerating," he snorts, "but sure, why not. I'll come over at nine. But don't you have two whole siblings?"

"Jiejie has two kids to juggle and Jiang Cheng's still taking care of moving in with his girlfriend," Wei Ying answers, "they have shit to do, you don't."

"Fair point."

Two days later, he's at Wei Ying's doorstep as he hears the clock inside strike nine. He rings the doorbell, and he hears running footsteps before Wei Ying throws the door open enthusiastically. "You made it!"

"I made it!" he smiles, then steps inside as he takes his shoes off. "Where's the little brat?"

"Qiu-gege!" A-Yuan comes running through and slams into Qingqiu's leg with extreme force, nearly toppling him.

"Hey, little baby," he says, lifting the kid up into his arms. Anything you should be doing right now?"

"Nope! Was pwaying wit' wegos," he tells Qingqiu.

"I was going to start something but I needed a second person to help me out. C'mon, to the kitchen!" Wei Ying declares, swiping his son from Qingqiu's arms and making rocket sounds as they zoomed off to the kitchen.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!" he hears A-Yuan yell happily as he follows them. When he arrives, Wei Ying is wrapping his son in a little apron.

Qingqiu looks at the counter and raises an eyebrow. "You're making him your toast?"

"Yep!" Wei Ying ties the straps at A-Yuan's waist. "Well, we're making it together. He's never had it before and I wanted to let him learn!"

"Am I getting any?" he asks, because Qingqiu is always ready for an opportunity for free food.

"If you're good and can be an extra set of hands for anything A-Yuan can't do, then yes."

"I'm onwy five, so I stiww can't do some stuff coz I don have the skiws yet," A-Yuan says very seriously. It sounds like something Lan Zhan would say to his son, but he knows it's Wei Ying who told him that.

"Alright then, kid," he ruffles his hair. "Time to make some toast."

For a five-year-old, A-Yuan makes extremely little mess. The butter doesn't get all over his hands and the counter, spread only slightly haphazardly across the slices of bread, which is better than he can do most days. Wei Ying handles the eggs, because as tidy as he is the kid's only five.

The cheese is a joint effort between father and son, A-Yuan holding the cheese to the grater as Wei Ying moves it up and down. It turns out tidier than he expected. If he tried that it'd definitely scatter everywhere including the ground.

He and Wei Ying are the ones to gently place the plates in the oven, obviously. A-Yuan bounces in his seat excitedly. "How long?"

"A little while," Wei Ying says, "but you can decide for yourself when it's all cooked through." How baked the toast is depends entirely on the consumer. Qingqiu likes it hard to the point where it's almost singed, but he knows Wei Ying likes it perfectly crunchily cooked through.

This session alone probably won't decide A-Yuan's true preference, given the nature of five-year-old children.



It's barely two minutes before he gets bored and runs off to mess with his untidied Lego building. Qingqiu follows him. Wei Ying stays back to monitor the toast.

He's a little surprised to see A-Yuan putting the tiny plastic bricks into storage boxes. "Why are you cleaning them up?"

"It takes a wong time to tidy up," A-Yuan tells him, "when I'm done wit de toys I can awweddy eat toast."

"I see," he nods. "Do you need my help?"

"Nahhhh," is the reply he receives, so he returns to the kitchen where Wei Ying is scrolling through his phone.

"How's your husband as he goes off to war?"

Wei Ying snorts. "He's asking for constant updates from home, which means he's not having too much of a great time. His brother should be arriving anytime soon, though, so they'll probably be able to at least have some brotherly bonding on this trip."

"And how is the widow?" He opens his arms, knowing what's coming.

Sure enough, Wei Ying turns and falls into them dramatically. "I miss my dearest husband so much, how will I fare when he is away? I yearn for his warm touch, his soft voice, his gorgeous eyes, his magnificent body."

"You've made your point, sad wife," Qingqiu interrupts, before lightly slapping his forehead. "Now stop being sad while I'm here, I can't take care of sad people."

Wei Ying shoots up and turns to him, grinning. "I have been cured!"

This is when A-Yuan comes in and proclaims, "I'm done! Is the toast done?"

"Maybe! Let's check," Wei Ying guides his son to the oven. "Is it done yet?"

"Hmrrrrrr," A-Yuan scrutinizes the food. "I think... is done!" he grins, and Qingqiu is pretty sure he just wants to get to the food as fast as possible since he's finished the task he was doing to pass the time.

Wei Ying knows this too, obviously, but he turns off the oven anyways because if he doesn't like it he could probably turn it into a quick lesson on waiting.

Qingqiu takes a pair of oven mitts and helps take out the hot plates. "Careful," he warns A-Yuan, "it's extremely hot. You might hurt yourself."

He nods. "So we gotta wait?"

"Yep!" Wei Ying chirps, setting a plate down on the counter before taking the oven mitts Qingqiu passes him to put it away with the ones he's wearing. "It'll take a little bit to cool down, but you can fan it if you wanna speed it up a little."

"Mmkay!" A-Yuan hops down from the chair and runs back to the room he was in, coming back with a small, child-sized fan. "This okay?"

"Yes, that's perfectly fine. Don't run, though," Wei Ying reminds him, gently ruffling his hair. "Now fan with all you've got!"

The enthusiasm at which kids do most things is comical, but watching a five-year-old flail his arms in some poor attempt at fanning his food is hilarious. Wei Ying is secretly taking a video, no doubt to send to his husband.

It's barely a minute before A-Yuan inevitably gets tired and asks, "Is it cool yet?"

"I don't know," Wei Ying says, "let's check." He gently reaches the tips of his fingers for the obviously not cooled toast yet and dramatically flinches his hand away with a very dramatic yelp. "Oh no! It's still so hot, A-Yuan. Better not eat it just yet."

"Aw," A-Yuan pouts, "Okay then." He sits crosslegged on the stool, crosses his arms, and stares at the plates as if that would

cool them faster. Both he and Wei Ying snap pictures.

They wait for him to get bored, but apparently waiting for toast to cool is currently an acceptable pastime for A-Yuan, so they just stand and sit there for the next five minutes until Wei Ying hands him a knife and fork, declaring them cool for consumption.

The mess that he makes digging in leaves him in shock, but the smile that spreads across A-Yuan's face when he bites into it leaves Qingqiu all warm inside.

By the extremely soft and happy look on Wei Ying's face, he's feeling the same.



### Plus One.

"A-Ying, come here," Changze calls. He waits as the patterning of small feet approaches and their owner runs into his legs. "Hi, sweetheart."

"Baba!" his four-year-old son grins up at him. "What ya makin'?"

He takes the plate with bread and brings it down to show him. "I'm making a very special type of toast today, A-Ying," he tells him. "Would you get an egg for me?"

"Egg?" he says dubiously, but goes to grab one from the fridge anyways. Changze lets himself smile while A-Ying's back is turned.

"Here!" he runs over, yet gently cradling the egg that reminds him of when he held a tiny baby Wei Ying. He's not big enough for Changze to struggle carrying him but he's so much bigger than he was then. He's going to cry to Mian-di about it later and hopefully he'll cry back about his own son growing up too fast.

Changze takes the egg and gestures for A-Ying to take the nearby stool. "I'm going to show you how to make a super cool sunny-side-up toast," he gestures at the ingredients on the table. "It's simple but it's going to be super difficult since you're so little, so you gotta pay close attention to the steps, and when you're older you'll have an easier time doing it, yeah?"

A-Ying nods enthusiastically. "Pay wots of atenshwon!"

Changze gets to work, spreading butter over the bread then denting it with a glass in the middle. Wei Ying doesn't stop asking questions, from what he's spreading over the bread to why he's doing it and what's he doing with that glass, why doesn't he make a full hole?

They continue endlessly as he cracks the egg into the dent, and he patiently replies to each one with a logical answer to the increasingly illogical questions.

"The butter looks like cheese," he giggles, and Changze takes the grater hanging nearby and jokingly grates the butter over the egg. Wei Ying doubles over laughing happily, and Changze's heart soars with love.

"Now we toast it by putting it in the oven for fifteen minutes," Changze points, "I already preheated it - that means I made it hot before so it'd be warm by the time I need to use it, so we need to be really careful when putting it in so I won't burn myself."

"Be caweful, Baba," Wei Ying says, eyes wide. "Bad to buwn youwsef."

He nods. "That's why I have oven mitts!" he puts them on and lifts them up, wiggling his hands comically.

Wei Ying giggles again. "They look so silly."

"Your mama thought it'd be funny," he tells him. They are funny - a pattern of lotus flowers with funny and weird faces



over them, with the occasional cute frog - they were custom made after Mian-di's doodle of the same pattern. He didn't even know oven mitts could be customized before that.

The plate is put in the oven and the timer is set, and the next fifteen minutes pass by with more of A-Ying's questions about everything in the kitchen, including questions he'd asked before. Repeated questions were a particular pet peeve of his, but apparently his son doing it makes it less annoying. He's glad, he hates being annoyed at his little baby.

A-Ying's questions abruptly cut off as the oven dings and he jumps out of his seat excitedly.

"It's done it's done it's done! Baba get it! It's done!"

"Patience, A-Ying, it's still hot. We still need to wait for it to cool before you can start eating, anyways. Won't you get your special fork?"

He gasps. "I fowgow about it!"

Changze smiles at him. "I know you did, now go get it, kay?"

"Yes, yes! Thank youw fow we-weminding me!"

"Very good, A-Ying. The word is reminding, and you're welcome," he praises. While A-Ying rushes to the cabinet for his favorite fork, Changze pulls out the hot plate and sets it on the dining table, fanning it gently.

A-Ying comes back and climbs onto the seat, poking at the bread with his fork.

"It's still hot, A-Ying, you can't eat it yet."

"Aw," A-Ying says. He stares at the toast. "So bowwing to wait."

"It is," Changze pats his head. The next ten minutes is a comfortable silence to Changze as Wei Ying distressedly fidgets and stares, excitement and anticipation silencing him. When Changze finally gives him the pass, his eyes brighten and he promptly attempts to slice through the toast with his fork, which is only partly successful.

Changze takes the butter knife, still unwashed, and helps him cut through the middle and a small piece for him to fork. A-Ying grins at the egg in the center dent, then forks the piece and vigorously shoves it into his mouth.

"Ish goof!" he tells Changze, crumbs spitting out.

"Chew first, A-Ying," he reprimands gently, chuckling.

He nods and chews, giving him a thumbs-up. Changze continues cutting it into smaller pieces, and A-Ying continues shoving pieces into his mouth and chewing, still refraining from talking.

When he finishes the whole plate (ten minutes, Changze counts) he hugs Changze, hurling himself into his lap.

"It was superrrr delish, Babal! Thank youw," he says into his shirt. "Lov it wots."

He laughs. "You're very welcome, A-Ying. Now it's shower time, so you can go get ready while I clean the kitchen, yes?"

"Mm!" A-Ying hurries back to his room as speedy as he did when he came in. Changze smiles at his retreating tiny form, warmth spreading through him different from the heat in the kitchen.

He gathers the dishes, cutlery, and other things to wash into the sink, then wipes down any dirty surfaces and leaves the oven open to cool. Then he gets to washing the dishes, and he is still scrubbing everything when the door clicks open and a familiar figure slinks into the kitchen with a mischievous grin that she passed down to A-Ying.

"Darling," she greets him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"Honey," he greets in return, turning his head to plant a kiss on her head. "How was today?"

"Average," she shrugs, "What's this smell? Did you make sunny-side-up toast?"

"Yep," he confirms. "Made one for A-Ying."

"Must've loved it," she smiles. "I know I do." She unwraps herself and wanders around the kitchen aimlessly as she keeps the conversation going. "Where's my little boy now? Thought he'd be in here with you."

"Told him to get ready for his shower, you can go with him if you'd like."

"Ah," she nods, then turns to the hall towards A-Ying's room. "Finish up those dishes, I'll take care of him."

"Thanks, love you," he says, pausing to blow her a kiss, a few suds flying out of his hand.

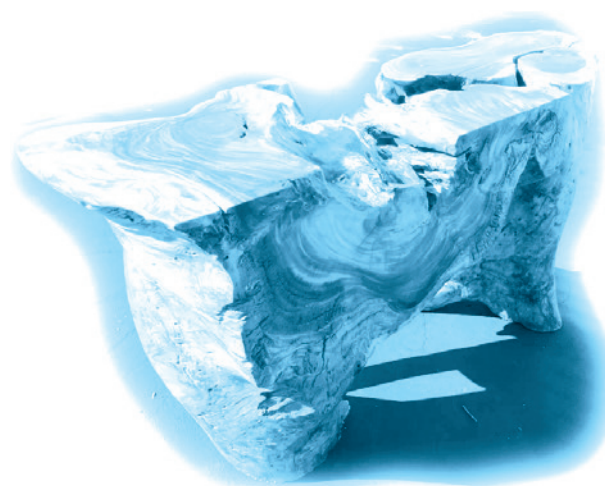
She laughs. "You're welcome, love you too," she returns the kiss.

Changze smiles once more to himself as he starts rinsing. He adores his family with all his heart, and even little moments like this never fail to make him feel like the happiest man in the world.

Moments like these that he wants to keep treasured in his heart forevermore.

### Notes:

The table in part three is best visually represented through this, but the one I'm imagining is shorter and longer



65

Changze's recipe is more fixed and doesn't have any cheese in it - Wei Ying remembers it having cheese because of the butter-cheese gag he did, and his memory of the recipe is spotty at best and the first time he does the recipe is with Yanli in part one, when he's seven, three years after he did the recipe for the first and last time with Changze. They die a few months after the scene in plus one.

The actual time for toasting is really an estimate/up to you because factors like the type of bread and how old your oven is plays into as well as your personal preference will affect the time

# How to make Sunny-Side-Up Toast!

Serves 1 slice of toast    by Nova

## Ingredients:

1 slice of bread  
20g butter, softened  
As much cheese as you'd like  
1 egg

## Tools:

Oven  
Oven-safe plate  
Butter knife  
Grater  
Glass (optional)

## Steps:

1. Put the slice of bread on the oven-safe plate. Preheat the oven to 180° C
2. Spread the softened butter on the bread.
3. Use the glass or your fingers to make a round indent in the bread. Do not cut or slice through the bread in any way, but make it deep enough to hold liquid.
4. Crack the egg into the indent you just made. Try to keep the yolk intact.
5. Grate cheese across the whole surface of the bread including the egg. The amount of cheese added is completely up to you.
6. Put the bread in the oven. Watch the bread as it's baking, because the end result is dependent on personal preferences and oven types.
7. Take it out when you think it's been cooked properly to your liking.
8. Leave it to cool.

**Enjoy!** Tip: cut it through the middle first with a knife!

66

# Orange bread

 by yanagi\_reiii

## Ingredients:

3/4 cup sugar  
2 eggs  
1 1/2 tablespoons orange zest  
(or more for intense orange flavor)  
2 cups all-purpose flour  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
1/4 teaspoon salt  
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon  
1 cup plain yogurt

## Steps:

1. remove the loaf from the pan, you may want to lay down a wide strip of parchment paper, along the length of the bottom of the loaf pan, and up the narrow sides. butter this as well.
2. beat the butter until fluffy, about 2 minutes on high in an electric mixer. add the sugar and beat for an additional 2 minutes. add one egg at a time, beating until completely incorporated after each addition. beat in the orange zest. in a separate bowl, whisk together the flour, baking soda, baking powder, salt and cinnamon.
3. add the yogurt and dry ingredients by thirds, starting with the yogurt, alternating the additions. beat only until just incorporated. add in raisins or cranberries if you like.
4. immediately pour batter into the prepared loaf pan. bake in oven for 45-50 minutes or until a skewer inserted into the center comes out clean. cool on a rack in the pan for 5 minutes. then remove the loaf from the pan and cool for another 10 to 15 minutes. serve with powdered sugar or glaze as you please.





延迟摄影

慢动作

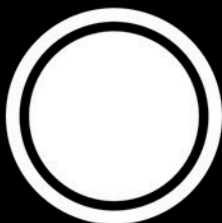
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# Cuccidati

✿ by stardustinjune

## Ingredients:

### Cookie dough

3/4 cup sugar  
2 eggs  
1 1/2 tablespoons orange zest  
(or more for intense orange  
flavor)  
2 cups all-purpose flour  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
1/4 teaspoon salt  
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon  
1 cup plain yogurt

### Filling

1lb figs (ground up)  
1/2 box of raisins  
1/4 tsp of cinnamon  
1/4 tsp of cloves  
1/4 tsp of black pepper  
1 cup coarsely cut dark  
chocolate  
fig preserves as desired  
1/4 cup sugar

## Steps:

1. Cream the butter and sugar. Beat in 3 eggs, add vanilla.
2. Mix flour, baking powder and cinnamon separately. Add to creamed butter mixture, adding a little milk as necessary to make stiff dough. Divide into disks; wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate.
3. Mix figs, raisins, and spices in a food processor. Then in a saucepan, mix 1/4 cup sugar and a little water, dissolve on a low fire. Add the processed mixture to the pan, mix to a medium firm mixture. Add fig preserves and dark chocolate as desired.
4. Roll out cookie dough and cut into 3" wide strips. Place rolls of filling in the middle of the strip and wrap dough. Cut diagonally and slice.
5. Bake at 375 degrees until light brown color.
6. Decorate with royal icing and round sprinkles.

## Enjoy!







@StudioStijnJune  
MeganSchultz  
7/2022







# Spicy Garlic Butter Linguini

Recipe by Marion's Kitchen

## 1 Make the garlic oil

4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil  
6 garlic cloves, finely sliced  
Medium heat  
Once the garlic is sizzling, cook for 2-3 minutes

## 2 Transfer the oil & the garlic to a bowl, set aside for later

The garlic will continue cooking & turn golden in the bowl

## 3

Salt  
200g (7 oz) linguine or spaghetti  
In salted boiling water, cook the pasta until al dente

## 4 While the pasta is cooking, make the butter sauce

75g unsalted butter  
4 garlic cloves, finely chopped  
1 tsp chilli flakes  
Medium-high heat  
Cook stirring until the butter is just melted

## 5

2 1/2 tbsp soy sauce  
2 1/2 tbsp oyster sauce  
Simmer for a minute, & take off heat until the pasta is cooked

## 6

Place the butter sauce back on the heat & add the pasta...

...cook, stirring for 3-4 minutes

## 7

3 tbsp parmesan cheese, finely grated

## 8

Serve the pasta with...

Garlic chips  
A drizzle of garlic oil  
2 tbsp spring onions (scallions), finely sliced  
Extra cheese

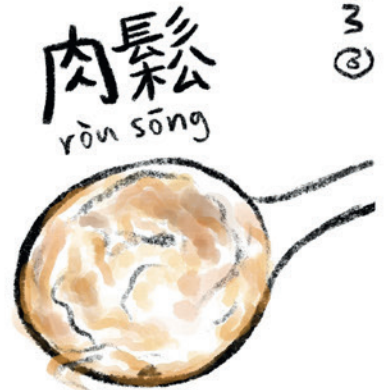


# 飯糰

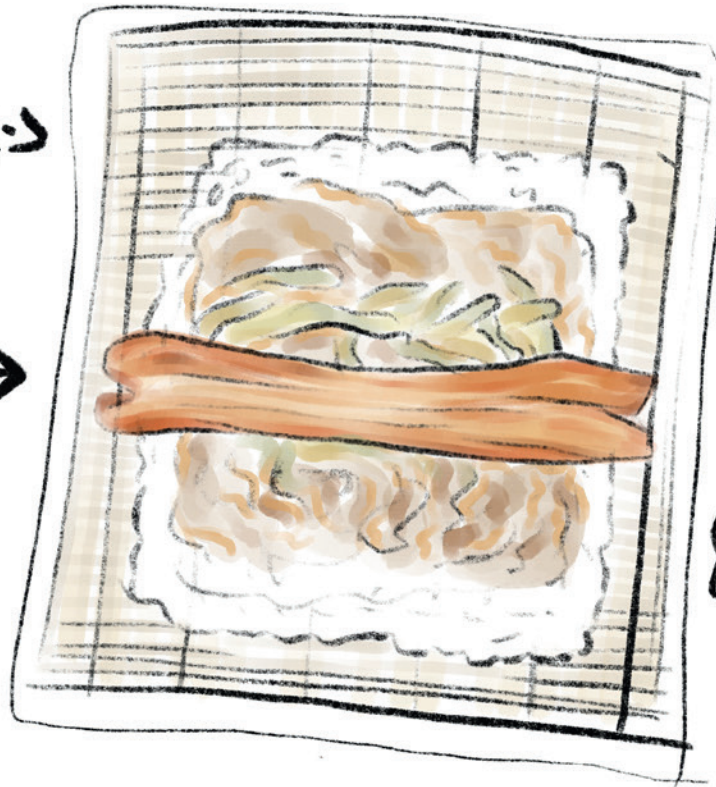
## FÀN TUÁN

@weilanne

glutinous rice  
SOAK!  
COOK!  
ADD A BASE LAYER

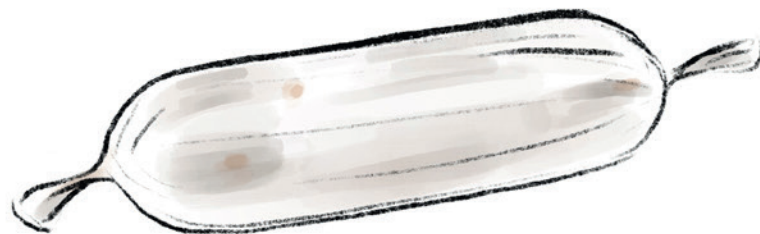


\* fillings  
can be  
whatever you  
want!  
eggs, sausage,  
any sauces \*



PRO TIP!  
ADD A  
BAMBOO  
SUSHI MAT  
UNDERNEATH  
FOR EASIER  
ROLLING

ROLL  
TIGHT



ENJOY IMMEDIATELY



## Important meals

by BlackWiresOnHerHead

**Every** morning before sunrise, Xie Lian wakes up, packs ingredients and a portable gas stove into his little cart, and begins pushing it down the streets.

Breakfast food has always brought him comfort, and people in the modern age had a disheartening habit of skipping their morning meal on their way to work. So with very little to his name, Xie Lian had decided to try and give back to his community.

The thing he failed to account for, of course, was his impressive inability to cook.

He'd started off completely earnestly, he really had. And all things considered, a significant amount of progress has been made. In those early days Xie Lian could hardly boil water without some kind of small fire, let alone cook the rice to the right consistency. But the rice became edible over time, and Xie Lian slowly turned his attention to the other ingredients as well.

Unfortunately, the few customers he sells to almost always fall ill after taking the first bite. Xie Lian gives them their money back when it happens, apologizing earnestly. So far his fan tuan cart has never made a profit—he has to keep wandering to new parts of the city to find new customers.

Only one customer has ever gotten past the first bite—a tall young man wearing a jacket of such striking, bright crimson that Xie Lian is able to recognize him immediately when he once again approaches the following day.

"Oh, it's you again!" Xie Lian says warmly. "Good morning."

The stranger nods. "I couldn't stop thinking about gege's fan tuan yesterday. I knew I had to come back and have another."

"Really?" Xie Lian has never had a return customer before. Perhaps this means that Xie Lian's cooking really is getting better! "Oh wonderful, wonderful. What would you like today?"

The stranger requests his egg cooked as an omelet (same as yesterday), rou song, youtiao, and extra pickled mustard stem in his fan tuan.

"Such a sour taste for such a nice-looking young man," Xie Lian says lightly.

"I like zha cai. It makes it crunchy," his customer says with a shrug.

"May this humble peddler ask what to call his first returning customer?" Xie Lian says as he stows the money into his little cash box.

The handsome stranger's head tilts to the side. "Gege can call me San Lang."

"It was an honor to serve San Lang this morning."

"The honor belongs to me."

San Lang's smile buoys Xie Lian's spirits for approximately thirteen minutes, which is how long it takes for a new customer to try his fan tuan and promptly turn a distressing shade of green. Xie Lian bows several times to that customer, apologizing profusely.

"Do you work nearby, San Lang?" he asks a few days later.

San Lang swallows a mouthful of fan tuan. "What makes gege say that?"

Xie Lian shrugs. "You always seem to find me in the mornings, no matter where I am in the city. San Lang is the only familiar face I see nowadays. Surely it means you also wander through the city on your way to work?"

"Yes of course. Gege is right, he's so observant." San Lang nods in the direction of the arts district. "My job is downtown. I enjoy walking down the streets when most people are waking up. And getting breakfast from gege on my way to the office."

"An office job! Oh my, I hope I never made you late."

San Lang had spent the past few mornings lingering with Xie Lian in the street, chatting long after he'd eaten the last of his fan tuan. It started when he fixed a door on the cart that hadn't been able to stay closed, and yesterday San Lang pulled out brushes and started painting the front of the cart while Xie Lian watched, awestruck at his talent.

San Lang waves a hand and shakes his head. "It's not the kind of job I can be late for. As long as the work gets done, it doesn't matter when I show up."

"Okay," Xie Lian says dubiously. "As long as San Lang isn't ignoring any responsibilities to help me."

"This one is very responsible, gege," he says solemnly, then points to the cart. "And perhaps this is one of my responsibilities too. I admire gege's resourcefulness, but you don't have to keep using broken things. It will make life much easier when you use things that function as intended."

"They still function!" protests Xie Lian. "So what if I warped my frying pan and it isn't completely flat anymore?"

"Gege..."

After a whole week of this routine—during which San Lang gifts him a pristine new frying pan and also repairs Xie Lian's tiny gas stove so the flame doesn't sputter out anymore—Xie Lian says, "Did San Lang know that he's my only returning customer?"

San Lang frowns, a wrinkle appearing on his forehead. It makes him look awfully cute. Xie Lian almost wants to touch it until it smooths out. "That can't possibly be true. Gege makes the best breakfast in the whole city."

"Ah, you're far too kind," insists Xie Lian, flapping his hands. "My only wish is to provide people with affordable food."

San Lang smiles when he says goodbye that day, but there's a distinct air of frustration as he turns away. He's so busy tapping something out on his phone that he nearly walks into the street just as a bicyclist comes racing down the pavement.

"Look out!" Xie Lian reaches out and grasps San Lang's wrist without a second thought, instinctively pulling him close to his chest. "San Lang would be safer if he was looking where he's walking," Xie Lian can't help but scold. What if San Lang got hit by a bicyclist? Or a motorcycle? A car? What would Xie Lian do then?

He suddenly realizes he's still holding San Lang very tightly, and quickly lets go.

After a short pause, San Lang nods and slides his phone into his pocket. "Gege is right, as always," he acquiesces.

Xie Lian turns back to his cart and stirs the glutinous rice, just to have something to do with his hands. "If San Lang didn't take care of himself, I'd get very upset."

"It won't happen again, I promise." San Lang tips his head forward. "I'll see you tomorrow, gege."

But early the next morning, a literal stampede of people rushes up to Xie Lian's little food cart.

Xie Lian's not sure how it happened either. One minute he's walking up the avenue like usual, trying to decide where to stop; the next, a voice shouting "THERE HE IS, THERE'S THE CART!" from somewhere behind him.

No fewer than a dozen people break into an all-out sprint to make the mad dash to Xie Lian.

"Sir, this one would be honored to be your first sale of the day!"

"I need six to bring to all my buddies!"

"Whatever he's ordering, I'll take twice as many!"

"Oh—oh my, please slow down," Xie Lian says among all the clamor. He nods at the person closest to him, a tall, boisterous person with a fascinating collection of tattoos up the entire length of their arms. "You said you needed six, is that right?"

"Yes that's correct."

"And how would you like the egg cooked for those? Fried, braised, or as an omelet?"

"Whichever is easiest for you, sir." They raise one arm in triumph and say jovially, "By the generosity of Hua Chengzhu, my team will be eating well today!"

Xie Lian doesn't let himself look away from the eggs and risk an accident that could ruin his new frying pan, so his eyes are still on the stove when he repeats, "Hua Chengzhu?"

"Our boss!" helpfully provides someone else in the crowd.

"He gave us a bonus food stipend for the whole week! The only thing he wanted in return was for us to support Sir's fan tuan cart at least once!"

"Is that so?" hums Xie Lian.

"Yeah, he's the best!"

Xie Lian gently prods the eggs in the frying pan—one yolk breaks and starts oozing bright yellow. "Then it appears this humble cook owes Hua Chengzhu a debt of gratitude."

San Lang arrives a few minutes later. When he reaches the front of the *line*—a line for his fan tuan! Xie Lian can hardly believe it—he remarks, "Gege has so many customers today."

Xie Lian pauses to wipe his forehead with his sleeve. "I'm not entirely sure where they all came from. It appears someone put in a good word for me."

"Oh?"

"The mysterious Hua Chengzhu has given his employees a very nice incentive to spend their food stipend on me."

San Lang hums and idly taps his fingers on the side of the cart. "I see. I heard it's very difficult to win Hua Cheng's favor. He has very high standards."

"Hmm," says Xie Lian, remembering all the customers incapable of eating more than the first bite.

But San Lang doesn't seem to think it's suspicious. He simply smiles and says, "I'm glad I got here while gege still has food."

"I'll always have food for you, San Lang! I can't send you off without a proper breakfast!"

But the next day, for the first time ever, Xie Lian completely sells out. He's just finished informing the disappointed patrons in line (all employees of Hua Chengzhu) when Xie Lian looks up to see San Lang crossing the street.

"It's all right," San Lang tries to say when he catches sight of the empty containers where the ingredients usually are. "I'm glad gege's business is as successful as it deserves to be." But the obvious pout on San Lang's face nearly brings Xie Lian to tears.

"Ah, but don't worry! I made you a promise!" Xie Lian hurriedly reaches into the cart and pulls out the fan tuan he'd hastily made in between customers. He slices the roll in half. "Extra zha cai, just like usual. Free of charge today."

"Gege should be compensated for his work," insists San Lang, pout turning into a frown.

"Bah, I've been compensated plenty. This is a token of appreciation for my best customer." Xie Lian holds it out until San Lang takes it with a grateful nod.

"Then this one is very grateful to accept..." San Lang hands back one half of the fan tuan. "But only if gege will eat with me."

They chat for a while as they eat their halves of fan tuan, and then San Lang insists on tugging the cart all the way back to Xie Lian's home.

"This is much heavier than I expected," San Lang says, surprised. "And this is *without* all the ingredients?"

"I can pull it myself, you don't have to worry, San Lang."

"It's okay, it's just... Gege, do these wheels even spin?"

Xie Lian laughs a little, rubbing the back of his neck. "Ah, no. The spokes got jammed not long after I got it. I haven't thought to fix it."

"So you've... just been dragging it around this whole time? When it doesn't even roll?"

"It's really not so bad!"

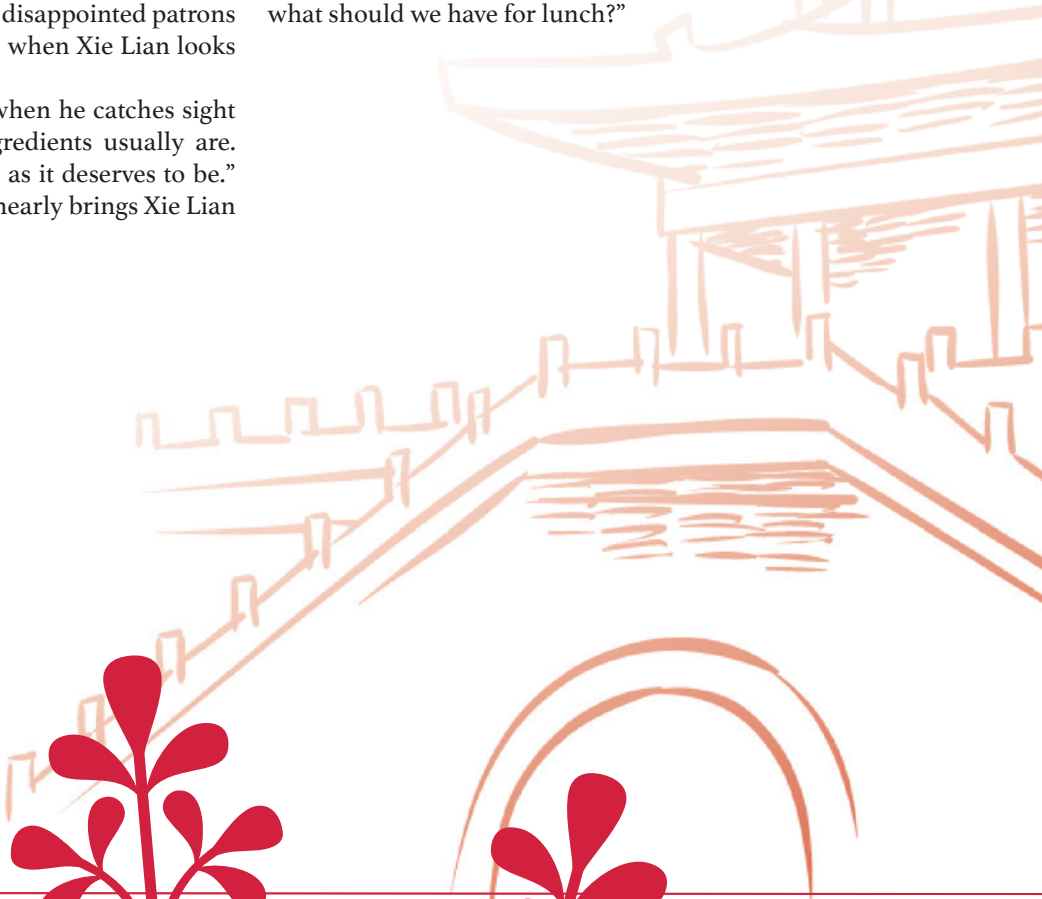
It's not long before they reach Xie Lian's threadbare housing. "Thank you so much for your help, San Lang. Would you like to come in for lunch?" But then Xie Lian remembers they just ate their breakfast together, so he adds nervously, "Or—just to talk—if you don't want to eat, that is."

"I always want to eat your food, gege," San Lang says immediately.

"Good, that's good," he says casually, then turns. "So what would you like to eat, Hua Cheng?"

A beat of silence. And then a sly smile. "I actually prefer it if you call me San Lang."

"Okay, San Lang. Please come in, I wanted to thank you for all your help." Xie Lian opens the door to his home. "Now what should we have for lunch?"










# Homemade Bread

Doses for 4 people

- 
- 500 g all-purpose Flour
  - 10 g brewer's yeast
  - 15 g salt
  - 375 g room temperature water

Using a wooden spoon, mix the **flour** and **salt** in a bowl. Slowly pour in the room temperature **water**, then add the crumbled **yeast**. Mix well. You're looking for a soft, uniform mixture; don't worry if it's a bit sticky at first. Cover the bowl with some cling film or a cloth, and let it rest for **15 minutes**.

Once the 15 minutes have passed, start working on the **folds**: remove the film, wet your hands with some water and gently pull up an edge of your dough; fold it carefully towards the centre. Rotate the bowl and repeat the process with the opposite edge, then two more times. In total, you need to fold the batter **4 times**.





Cover with your cloth, wait **15 minutes** and then make **4 new folds**, using the same process. Cover again, wait an additional **15 mins** and work on the last round of **4 folds**. Cover, and let rest for **16 hours at 22°C** (if your room temperature is higher, resting time will be shorter. Make sure to check your dough regularly without uncovering it).

Lay a **cloth** on your working surface and lightly cover it in flour; place your dough on the cloth, flatten it a bit and **fold** the upper side over the lower; then the left side over the right, the right over the left, the lower over the higher, to make a **square**. Fold the corners towards the centre, then wrap the cloth around the dough and place it in a bowl.

Let it rest in the **fridge** for **4 hours**.

Place your dough on parchment paper and cover it with flour; cut a **cross** on the surface, then place it on a baking tray and put it in the pre-heated oven at **220°** for **35-40 minutes**. Let it cool on a grid. Enjoy your homemade bread!



**Autumn** on Mount Taicang was stunning, the red leaves of the maple trees growing wild over the knees of the mountain sparkling in the golden morning sunlight. Some were already turning shades of red and orange and yellow, carpeting the ground in striking colour. The vast sky spread its piercing blue mantle overhead, and a crisp breeze made a person breathe with a sense of wellbeing and wonder at the beauty of the world.

But Hua Cheng had eyes only for one particular beauty, who almost danced in his eagerness to show his mountain to the Ghost King. Xie Lian, his Dianxia, his lovely face glowing with divine light, his eyes sparkling, a smile constantly on his lips: he loved him like this, a sight so rarely seen. So alive, so... very much like the Crown Prince of all those years ago.

All he needed was the golden mask, Hua Cheng thought, and it would be as if they were returning back to that day long centuries ago.

"Come with me, San Lang!" Dianxia almost sang, his excitement bubbling over as he caught up Hua Cheng's hand to tug him along.

Hua Cheng laughed in delight, and reeled his beloved into a close embrace. "What does gege wish this humble one to see?" he asked the momentarily startled god.

Xie Lian's surprise resolved into joy, and he reached up with his spare hand to cup Hua Cheng's face, planting a gentle kiss on his cheek. "Everything!" he declared, disentangling himself, but refusing to release the hand he held - the one around which was tied the red string that bound their destinies to each other.

"Did you see the trees lining the path to the house?"

"Mmm."

Xie Lian's beautiful face was momentarily cast in complex shadows. He looked down at his feet briefly before returning an earnest gaze to Hua Cheng. "Compared to eight hundred, one year is like a drop in the ocean. I planted the trees hoping they'd flower in time for your return. I wanted the pathway up to the house to be resplendent with flowers to meet the Crimson Rain Sought Flower. But..."

"I did not return in time."

"It really doesn't matter," Dianxia hastened to add, clearly anxious that Hua Cheng not feel put upon. "They will bloom, no doubt, next year."

He did not feel disappointed; instead he found it endearing. It was a new thing to realise he was wanted, looked for, worth waiting for by the one always in his heart. Dianxia had caught him that day when he fell from the city wall; for the last year his waiting had been a form of being ready to catch him again on his return to corporality.

"This San Lang would have returned to gege's side sooner, had he been able to," he said, wrapping both arms around the slighter form, and burying his face in his lustrous, shining hair. "I never want to be the cause of gege's pain."

Xie Lian hugged him back tightly, unspoken messages and past memories whispering without words between them.

This was something new: that they could reach for the other and find them willing to reach back; wanting to touch and be touched. It was new, and there was still something dreamlike about it, something about which Hua Cheng had to ask himself often, *Is this real? Can I really have him here, in my arms?*

*To have, to hold? Real, alive, flesh and blood...*

They started to stroll along a path strewn with brightly coloured leaves, Xie Lian's arm wrapped around his own. Beneath the leaves the path was tidy and straight, all rough places smoothed and recently so.

"The paths look inviting to walk upon. Is this gege's work too?" he asked.

"Of course. I didn't want San Lang to trip. It had been many years..." His beloved's voice trailed off. He shook his head, dispelling unwanted ghosts of the past.

Hua Cheng frowned internally. At some point they needed to talk through some of these things that haunted them. It would be convenient of course to ignore the pain of their past - shared pain and that which they had each suffered alone, whether one hundred years in a coffin full of spikes, or years incarcerated beneath Mount Tonglu...

But not today. Today was a day of joy, of reunion, of discovering each other and simply relishing the other's presence.

He bent his head to kiss the palms of Xie Lian's hands, happy when this resulted in a fetching blush high on Dianxia's cheeks.

"San Lang!"

"This is to bless Dianxia for the hard work he did with his own hands, hauling stones and levelling paths to make a way for this unworthy one. What else has gege been up to?"

As they proceeded up the mountain, Xie Lian did not stop talking, pointing out this or that. Looking around, the love and care his beloved had given to putting the mountain in order needed no words. Everything around him spoke the truth, a truth he had realised some time ago, but which kept reinforcing itself: Hua Cheng was wanted, and not only that, but there was no part of him that his beloved Dianxia would not want, no part that would put him off or make him turn away.

Tears rose unbidden and flowed down his cheek.

"San Lang?" Xie Lian asked with concern. They'd stopped inside the ruins of the Huangji Temple. He came close and gently reached up to dry Hua Cheng's cheek with the edge of his sleeve. "Are you alright?"

He laughed, sputtering through his tears, reaching up to take the slender hand between his own. "Yes. Fine. Now that I am with you." Hua Cheng continued to hold the hand in his, gazing into the warm honey-golden eyes of his beloved.

He smiled wryly, looking down to their joined hands, as he began to play with Xie Lian's fingers. So long, so delicate. And yet he was a martial god: his little finger was stronger than most people's entire bodies, especially now that his divine power had been restored.

"Do you know that it was here that some boys once teased me? I was defending the temple, and they said, 'Why do you care for this place so much? Is it where your wife lost her virginity?'"

When he looked up, Xie Lian was beet-red and speechless. And then he surprised Hua Cheng by leaning up on tiptoe to whisper in his ear: "What if this is where your wife would *like* to lose his virginity?"

Hua Cheng threw back his head and laughed long and hard. When he sobered, he leaned close to his beloved without touching him. The space between them tingled with expectation. "If that is what Dianxia wishes, this San Lang shall be happy to oblige."

"... When it's been rebuilt." Xie Lian planted himself within the circle of Hua Cheng's arms, expected them to come around him, and twirled the plait with the red coral pearl bead between his fingers.



"Gege has worked hard. But if gege would like to rebuild this temple, he has only to ask." A single command to his subordinates, and this temple would rise in days, covered in gold leaf to gleam in the light, brighter than the mountain on which it stood.

A complicated light flickered in the depths of Xie Lian's eyes as he looked away, a crease appearing between his eyebrows.

"Of course, if gege wants to build it himself, this one will help," he offered.

"Together?"

"En. If that is what gege desires."

The lingering emotion in his eyes faded and his god smiled up at him. How was Xie Lian's smile so radiant - like the dawn breaking after the darkest night?

He took Hua Cheng's hand gently in his own, intertwining their fingers. "That would please me greatly. Together."

After a long pause of simply drinking each other in, Xie Lian broke their eye contact, but continued the tour grasping Hua Cheng's hand. He enjoyed the sensation of warmth, the thought of skin on skin, the solid reality that so often before his third 'death' he'd scarcely been able to believe. For finally, finally their paths had crossed and he had been in the position to hold the umbrella over this tender white flower's head to shelter him from all that could stain.

Dianxia led him back down the hill to the dilapidated cottage. "I've already rebuilt it twice. But you know I've never been good with building things." He chuckled apologetically. "I'm glad you're here, San Lang, because you have much more of a knack for making things than I do."

"Gege exaggerates," he responded, amused. Everything about Xie Lian delighted him.

"Come on," Dianxia urged. "I've got one more place to show you."

Obediently he followed around to behind the cottage - to see an enormous vegetable garden with all sorts of things growing.

"Wow," he commented. "Gege has been busy."

"I wanted to be able to feed my San Lang on his return. It wouldn't do for me to have nothing to feed you."

"What has gege been growing? Surely food could be bought?"

Xie Lian shook his head adamantly. "Not these. Here I have rare varieties of radishes growing; there is starfruit, eggplant, snow peas. And these," he said, gesturing proudly towards a large plot closest to them, "are potatoes."

"Potatoes?"

"Yes. A root vegetable, good for many dishes. Starchy and slightly sweet."

"But not common. I have never come across potatoes before," he replied.

"These ones aren't quite ripe yet; see how they're still a little green?" Dianxia gently brushed some of the dirt away from the base of one plant so Hua Cheng could see the green potato.

"How do you know when they're ripe?"

"When the top part of the plant above the soil starts to wither and die," Dianxia said, standing and brushing his hands lightly against his thighs to free them from the worst of the dirt, streaking the pure white cultivator's robes he still favoured. Now he looked closely, Hua Cheng wondered if this was the same set of almost ragged clothing Xie Lian had been wearing during their last adventure, and he frowned. His gege was so unconcerned by fashion or appearance.

He made a mental note to send instructions for new robes to be made for his Dianxia. How could he possibly allow him to trail around jianghu - or the Heavenly Realm for that matter - in threadbare rags?

"Don't frown so," Xie Lian instructed, proceeding to misconstrue Hua Cheng's expression. "It's all part of the life cycle of the plant."

Hua Cheng shook his head to dispel his thoughts, smiling back. "Gege is right."

"And I have the perfect recipe for them! It is a very versatile vegetable: it can be boiled, baked, mashed, shredded, or even dried and ground into a flour. I was lucky to come across these a few months ago when I was scavenging further afield and recognised them. Many years ago a trader from the far west gifted a bag of potatoes to me in payment for services rendered. As I'd spent a few days journeying with the man, he'd also shared with me some of his recipes, and I had a chance to try a few." His eyes glittered in delight at a good memory in the long wandering years before they had met again. "As for these - someone had thrown them on their compost heap, if you could believe that. All because they'd grown eyes. But you see, that's the perfect time to plant them, when they grow eyes."

Hua Cheng did not know what to make of this. It sounded like something more likely to be found in the Ghost Realm. Fancy, a vegetable that could grow eyes. Well, then.

"This San Lang shall look forward to enjoying gege's potatoes. With or without eyes."

Xie Lian laughed. "Without. A few more weeks, and they should be ready to harvest."

Arms around each other, they continued to wander some more beneath the falling maple leaves. Hua Cheng found himself filled with warm contentment and the anticipation of many such walks through the golden light with his beloved Dianxia.



Time worked strangely in the Ghost Realm, but Xie Lian instinctively knew it was early when he woke, encircled in his San Lang's arms.

He carefully extricated himself, gingerly dressing as quietly as he could so as not to wake his slumbering husband. Hua Cheng's strength was practically limitless. While the Ghost City mostly ran by itself, whenever he did return there was always an exhaustive pile of work to be done, projects to be checked, progress to be monitored by its lord and master. And Hua Cheng, he had discovered, found much of this tedium of governance exhausting.

Xie Lian had his own work to do, of course. While his most faithful worshipper offered unstinting devotion wherever they went, especially in Qiandeng Temple, because of his connection to the Ghost King many of the city's inhabitants sought out the divine blessing of the Crown Prince. One of Hua Cheng's subordinates gathered the prayers on Xie Lian's behalf, the petitioners knowing their prayer requests would likely not be answered until Great Uncle's return. And so Xie Lian himself had spent the last two days quietly sifting and sorting and responding to the prayers he deemed worthy.

The hard work had been worth it - now he had the time to do something just for the two of them.

Leaving the Ghost King to sleep, he slipped out of the room and headed for Paradise Manor's kitchen, thinking about the prayers he intended to answer today: one a petition for safety for a relative; and one for good fortune.

The latter was something of an irony; prayers for good fortune forwarded to the Crown Prince he usually passed across to Hua Cheng - who would choose whether or not to grant said desired fortune on a whim. The ghosts of Ghost City had learned that they had a higher chance of succeeding in their prayers if they channelled them through Xie Lian, because City Master could refuse him very little - and everyone knew it.

Paradise Manor was a confusing place, its corridors liable to changing unexpectedly from time to time. At one point Hua Cheng had explained the spell which governed which rooms appeared where, but Xie Lian had found this impossible to follow, probably because the spell was written by his husband, whose handwriting was notoriously illegible.

After a few minutes of searching he located the kitchen, only to be surprised by both its emptiness and relative cleanliness. On the one hand, a clean kitchen was always inspiring. On the other it prompted a great many questions about the origin of the food they'd been consuming the last few days they'd been here.

Refusing to dwell on it, Xie Lian proceeded to explore, seeking out ingredients with which he could make something to take back to his beloved for breakfast. Apart from the basics - flour, oil, salt, spices, rice, all well-stored - the kitchen was bare of food, much to his consternation.

He closed the last cupboard and stood up straight, hands on his hips and pondering. It would not be impossible to prepare something using such humble ingredients, although it would be pretty ordinary fare, and not at all what he'd had in mind. Was it too risky to go down to the market? But in all the times he'd walked along the main street of the Ghost City, Xie Lian had yet to catch sight of a shop selling vegetables. And with all respect to Butcher Zhu, he would sooner gnaw his own wrist than eat anything from his stall...

Arms snaked around him from behind, clasping him close to a solid body, and a face rested on his shoulder.

"Morning, gege," a sleepy voice mumbled. "What is Dianxia doing, out of this one's arms?"

"This unworthy one is within San Lang's arms," Xie Lian protested with a smile, "as he prefers to be."

Hua Cheng huffed against his neck in amusement. "Come back to bed."

"I was intending to make breakfast and bring it to you," he complained. "But there's not much here to cook with. San Lang," he said, turning in his husband's arms, "I see no servants, and the kitchen looks barely used; where has the food been coming from these last few days?"

Hua Cheng looked down at him, his mouth quirked in a grin. Instead of answering the question, he turned, and going back through the entrance to the room, reached down to take up a bag he'd dropped there.

"For you." He offered the bag to Xie Lian.

How curious! Xie Lian looked at him with a piercing interest. "Thank you, San Lang."

"Open it," the Ghost King commanded, a curious glitter in his eyes.

Xie Lian hefted the bag onto the bench, carefully reaching in to withdraw its contents. Out onto the bench rolled four large potatoes and a bunch of chives. "Where...?" he asked in astonishment.

Hua Cheng smiled happily. "Gege is pleased?"

Xie Lian threw his arms around his neck and kissed him soundly. "Of course. But... how?"

His husband shrugged.

"Back when you showed me the garden you said the potatoes would be ready in about three weeks' time. It's been four weeks since then. This one went to check the garden yesterday, and found it to be as gege had said: the potatoes were ready for harvest, according to gege's instructions."

Xie Lian reached up to cup one pale cheek. Each of these thoughtful little actions made a little of him melt inside with sweet endearment. "My San Lang is so thoughtful. Thank you!" He planted a gentle kiss on the other's lips, and before large hands could alight upon him and give them both other ideas for how the morning might go, he nimbly moved out of reach.

He held up a potato, examining it: the soil of Mount Taicang must still retain its blessing, for it was a decent size. All of the potatoes were. "Now. Is there a knife good for peeling and shredding here? Ah," he opened a drawer at Hua Cheng's nod and found a blade suitable for his purpose.

"Let me," Hua Cheng offered, taking the potato and the knife from Xie Lian's hands, along with the others on the bench, and going to wash and peel them.

A few minutes later, Hua Cheng returned with the potatoes. During his absence Xie Lian had meanwhile managed to get the fire on the stove stoked to a good burn, and had located a suitable bowl in which to mix ingredients.

Hua Cheng again wrapped his arms around Xie Lian's waist, refusing to be parted from him.

"What does gege want this one to do with these?" he gestured to the potatoes.

"They need to be shredded as finely as possible." Xie Lian very much hoped his husband would take the hint; shredding potatoes required full use of one's hands and concentration - meaning those arms and hands could no longer distract the head chef.

Hua Cheng stood back and for a long moment looked at him strangely before summoning E-Ming. The red eye on its hilt revolved in delight at being summoned to be in the presence of its favourite person.

Xie Lian couldn't help but extend a hand to gently stroke the sabre. How could anyone ever believe this sabre to be evil and fearsome? He found it endearingly cute. "Would E-Ming like to shred the potatoes?"

The sabre shuddered with delight and leapt to the task joyfully.

Ruoye unwound itself from Xie Lian's wrist, protesting the attention E-Ming had just received. Xie Lian patted it absent-mindedly. "Calm down, Ruoye." But the cloth refused to listen to him, waving around and clearly seeking a task by which it also could contribute to the preparation of breakfast.

Unexpectedly it alighted on the handle of the wok Xie Lian had filled with oil and set to heat on the stove.

"No!" he exclaimed in horror. "You get yourself away from there right now! Mu Qing would be horrified to see you risk yourself like this; he would be most upset were I to present you burned through to be mended, after having sworn he'd not do it again."

The threat of not being mended should it get burned appeared to connect, and Ruoye sulked over to a corner of the room and huddled in a lifeless heap.

Hua Cheng laughed. "Gege has spoiled his spiritual tool. See how it behaves! By contrast... E-Ming! Enough. Over there, now." The sabre stopped its frantic chopping and went like a dog with its tail between its legs after being scolded by its master to join Ruoye in the corner.

"Do you need to treat it that way?" Xie Lian couldn't help but ask.



Hua Cheng was unfailingly good to him, but could be needlessly mean to others around him. "E-Ming is a good sabre: look how well it shredded the potato," he praised. After the previous scorn of its master, the praise seemed exaggerated, even to Xie Lian's own ears.

Over in the corner, E-Ming preened as if showing off to Ruoye, which steadfastly ignored the sabre.

"Right," Xie Lian said, ignoring the octopus tentacles clinging to him to empty the shredded potato into the mixing bowl. "Now we add: salt, two eggs - because of the quantity, we want that potato to hold together, and a good shaking of rice flour. San Lang, can you pass me the chives?"

Not wanting to start another row between Ruoye and E-Ming, Xie Lian finely chopped the chives himself before adding them to the mixture.

"Now we mix it until well combined. And then - " Using a spoon, he gently ladled spoonfuls of the mixture into the shallow oil, flattening them slightly against the edge of the pan.

"Watch until they turn golden around the edges, then flip them over: so," he demonstrated.

After half an incense stick's time, he deftly fished the golden, crispy treats out of the wok with a slotted spoon and placed them to rest on a dish.

A crafty hand reached out to pinch one - a hand Xie Lian lightly smacked for good measure. "Ah, ah, ah! No cheating!"

He added another batch to the wok, and leaned back against the bench. Hua Cheng hemmed him in bodily, an arm on either side of his hips. This close, with him hovering like this, Xie Lian's whole body yearned to mould itself to that of his husband - but if he did that, their breakfast would burn beyond even Hua Cheng's capacity to consume it.

He quietly summoned Ruoye, which proceeded to wrap itself around Hua Cheng's face playfully. His husband moved as if to free himself from the cloth - only to find that Xie Lian had grasped both his hands.

"Mmmph!" he protested. Ruoye had managed to wind itself around the entire lower half of his face!

Xie Lian laughed at the helplessly outraged look on Hua Cheng's face. "Alright, Ruoye. Enough."

Obediently the silk strip released the Ghost King and slid down to bind itself around Xie Lian's wrist. He turned to fish the latest batch of hash browns out of the wok, and add the next.

A tail end of the silk loosened itself and seemed to be blowing raspberries at Hua Cheng behind Xie Lian's back. Xie Lian abruptly turned around, catching the moment Hua Cheng's expression shifted from poking his tongue out at the spiritual tool.

He prodded his husband's chest with a finger. "Wow, what a scary Ghost King, demonstrating his immense power to a lowly spiritual weapon." He chuckled. "Perhaps you should be demonstrating to me instead, San Lang," he suggested.

Hua Cheng closed in with a searing kiss, hands roaming down Xie Lian's back to even more distracting locations.

"Mmm! Mmm!" He broke free in order to remove yet more hash browns from the wok and add the last batch. On the plate off to the right was a steaming pile that smelled mouthwatering, the tang of the chives notable over the oil and potato.

Behind him, Hua Cheng placed a row of soft kisses along the back of his neck, just over the hem of his robe. He'd noticed his husband had a penchant for kissing him there - and with good reason, he reflected, as his knees almost gave out and he caught himself on the bench for support.

Several minutes later, they sat down at the rustic table, a steaming pile of crispy golden deliciousness between them.

"One more thing!" Xie Lian leaped up, returning with a pinch of salt which he scattered over the top of the hash browns. "Now they're ready to eat!" he said, reaching for one with his chopsticks.

Hua Cheng's eyes observed him avidly as the salty, oily, potato-y crunch sent a burst of flavour across his taste buds. "Mmm. It's as good as I remember! Here, you have one."

Xie Lian picked up another hash brown and lifted it to his husband's lips, wondering why he was so coy about this food, when he'd always been nothing less than enthusiastic about Xie Lian's cooking. He took a small bite - and Xie Lian watched in satisfaction as the Ghost King's eyes closed in pleasure.

"Mmm," he said, swallowing. "It's very good. It reminds me a little of scallion pancakes."

"Yes," he replied with a smile.

With a light of mischief dancing in his eye, Hua Cheng picked up a potato confection and fed it to Xie Lian. He accepted the offering, but made a sound of protest.

"No, no. These are for you! Eat, San Lang."

In the end, they fed each other, which while awkward was also... exactly as it needed to be. Xie Lian rationalised: "This way I ensure San Lang eats enough."

"And Gege doesn't give all his food away," Hua Cheng added, nodding.

When at last the plate was empty, Xie Lian let out a sigh. "Hash browns," he said with a smile. "I once made them, you know, for Mu Qing and Feng Xin. Can you guess their reaction?"

Hua Cheng's face took on a distinctly displeased look as he considered it. "I hope those two wastes of space declared Gege's recipe to be the most delicious thing they'd tasted in centuries. Or else I might need to go pay a visit to their palaces and convince them otherwise."

"No, no, San Lang," Xie Lian pleaded, waving both hands. "No need for that. But you're right: they choked and gagged and spat it out. What a waste of good food," he shook his head. "I suppose they didn't like the texture, or perhaps the oiliness."

He watched Hua Cheng's reaction, admiring the control he exerted before saying, "Gege's hash browns are the most delicious of any deliciousness this one has tasted in many years." His features hardened. "And if those louts don't appreciate it, then they're uncultured numbskulls who can't stomach something stronger than over cooked, underseasoned congee. Dogs who can't learn new tricks, wholly lacking in courage to try new things. Pah. Gege is well rid of them."

Xie Lian laughed. "You really don't like them. Aw, San Lang. They're not that bad."

"They are. Gege is too forgiving."

Xie Lian rose from the table, and went around it, planting himself in Hua Cheng's lap. "Only to my San Lang," he said, and kissed him, enjoying the lingering taste of chives and oil and salt on his lover's tongue.

Breaking the kiss, he wrapped both arms around Hua Cheng's neck. For an incense stick's time they sat there, holding each other, revelling in the warmth of simply being together.

"San Lang, would you like to go back to bed? Just for a little while?"



The idea of lazing in bed with his beloved, their appetite (for now) sated, appealed greatly. But before Hua Cheng could rise, before he could realise what was happening, Xie Lian had climbed down off his lap, and lifted him bridal-style. He experienced a moment of panic, throwing his arms around Xie

Lian's neck, before the world stabilised once more.

It was so unexpected that Dianxia should pick him up like this. Ordinarily Hua Cheng felt a compulsion to protect his Xie Lian. The discrepancy in their physique when he was in his Ghost City Master's form filled him with satisfaction that his strength could support his beloved. But Xie Lian was a deity after all, and a martial deity at that, whose slight frame concealed immense power. He had no doubt that, if it weren't so awkward, he could even have picked Hua Cheng up with not much more than his little finger, had he so chosen. It was slightly disorienting to be reminded of this... and also compellingly alluring.

"You never said where the servants are," his beloved commented as he carried him back to their bedchamber.

"Mmmm," Hua Cheng replied noncommittally. "They come and go." He decided to keep from his Dianxia the fact that most of the food in the Ghost Realm was inedible - truly inedible, and so each day he himself had chosen a different place to acquire his husband's favourite treats. Nothing was too much trouble for him to go to for his beloved.

It was still early, no need to be going about work until they so desired. They crawled back beneath the blankets and lay facing each other, Hua Cheng's arms loosely linked around Xie Lian's waist. Slender hands made their way inside Hua Cheng's inner robe; Dianxia enjoyed being able to touch him skin to skin, and he had no objection to this.

Xie Lian sighed happily, and smiled at him, caressing his cheek and brushing stray hair behind his ear. "You really enjoyed breakfast? You weren't just saying that?"

Hua Cheng frowned for a moment. "Of course. Why would I lie to gege?"

Dianxia shook his head. "I'm glad."

Sunlight streamed in through the window, bathing them both in its golden beatitude. Hua Cheng was momentarily breath taken by the way it limned his beloved, making what showed of his white inner robe above the blanket shine golden with dazzling light. Like this, reclining beside him, he was more resplendent than ever the golden statue in the Crown Prince temple on Mount Taicang had ever been.

They had waited eight hundred years for each other, waited centuries for this moment. The morning light felt like a benediction resting upon them, consecrating all that had been and would be between them from now on. He'd never expected, never dreamed that the soft warmth of being held and holding his beloved Dianxia could be his. Yet here they were, together.

"Thank you for fetching the potatoes yesterday," his shining god spoke.

Hua Cheng drew their faces closer together and kissed his nose lightly.

"Gege is welcome. This one lives to serve Dianxia."

He thought about the potatoes. Xie Lian had grown them for a day when he could share them with Hua Cheng. He had planted, watered, weeded, sheltered, grew them - and showed them off. As with all the other many things he'd done while waiting, he had hoped, had believed Hua Cheng would return to him; the planting of flowering trees for him to delight in, the straightening of crooked paths, the tidying and weeding and infinite love and care and preparation he'd put in.

As with all of this, the potatoes were a metaphor for waiting until the time was ripe for them to embrace one another without having to let go. His own faith in his Dianxia had never wavered even once; there was no circumstance in which he would willingly fail to stand with him, beside him.

It touched Hua Cheng deeply to realise his faith was reciprocated. All symbolised by potatoes.

And now they'd started their life together - still something Hua Cheng could hardly comprehend. A few months for potatoes; eight hundred years for each other, for this.

Eight hundred years were not so long when compared with the eternity that lay before them to share, their wandering paths finally woven together.

He gathered his beloved close, holding him tightly, unashamed to drift off as his husband already had, lulled by the golden light and warmth and a full stomach.



# Hash browns with chives

Serves 2 ✨ multiply mixture if cooking for more than two ✨ by Ashaya T'Reldai

## Ingredients:

3 medium potatoes, or 2 large  
½ cup rice flour  
1 egg  
Salt to taste  
¼ cup finely chopped  
fresh chives  
Oil for shallow frying

## Steps:

1. Peel and grate the potatoes into a bowl.
2. Add the rice flour, egg, salt, and chives, and mix until well-mixed.
3. Don't be too perturbed if the mixture oozes moisture; if necessary this can be drained carefully.
4. Prepare a fry pan with about ½ cup oil (I use rice bran oil). When the oil is hot enough, drop spoonfuls of the mixture into the pan and flatten slightly using the spoon.
5. When the outsides of the hash browns look crispy, turn over. Cook until golden on both sides.
6. Set aside on a plate on some kitchen paper towel (to absorb extra oil), and do the next batch.
7. Serve with anything like:
  - Smoked salmon
  - Sour cream or crème fraîche
  - Eggs and bacon
  - Maple syrup

*Or just eat on their own!*

